

1984

## Kunapipi 6(3) 1984 Full version

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## Kunapipi 6(3) 1984 Full version

### Abstract

Full text of issue



KUNAPIPI



# KUNAPIPI

VOLUME VI NUMBER 3  
1984



*Kunapipi* is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

All correspondence — manuscripts, books for review, inquiries — should be sent to:

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# Kunapipi

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VOLUME VI NUMBER 3

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*Kunapipi* is published with the assistance of the Literature Board of the Australia Council and the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

Cover: The Paradise Tram, popularly known as the *Green Goddess*. We would like to thank Dr Leon Atkinson, Department of History, University of Adelaide for helping us to obtain this photograph. This proved a very difficult task indeed. In our innocence we believed that many people would find a tram going to Paradise an unusual phenomenon and take a photograph of it. However, the difficulty we have had in finding just ONE picture would seem to indicate that the worthy citizens of Adelaide found it a very natural thing to be conveyed to Paradise in a tram.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To News Ltd for permission to reprint 'The last tram to Paradise'.

To John Radcliffe for the photograph of the Trolley Bus to Paradise and the Tram at Paradise Terminus.

To the Electric Transport Museum, St Kilda, for permission to reprint photographs of the Paradise Tram.

Stop Press: After searching for almost a year for photographs of the Paradise Tram just one day before going to press it, in Bruce Clunies Ross's words, 'suddenly started raining Paradise Tram photographs'. We've included a number of them so that when you finally decide to go to Paradise, you'll be able to recognize the correct transport.

Anna Rutherford

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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# The Paradise Tram

The Paradise tram left from the Boer War monument outside the gates of Government House in Adelaide on the long route through the north-eastern suburbs to the foot of Black Hill, where the River Torrens breaks out of its gorge in the Mount Lofty Ranges into the Adelaide Plain. At the terminus the maroon drop-centre trams changed tracks and waited by a stand of gum trees, through which the sun slanted across the blue-stone walls of an early settlement and the newer brick and sandstone facades of double-fronted bungalows with scalloped verandah walls, decorative renderings of stucco or pebble-dash and tapered columns inset with river stones. Among them were gaps for houses yet to be built, where small-holders continued market-gardening on the river silt. This was Paradise.

It may have been literal-minded or naïve of our forefathers to give such names to their suburbs, yet it was appropriate, for as Donald Horne has pointed out, Graeme Davison explained, and even Robin Boyd acknowledged, the suburbs are the outcome of an Australian dream.<sup>1</sup> In his books about Australia, Donald Horne has given a lot of attention to this part of our culture. We were, he suggests, 'the first suburban nation'; our towns were 'important frontiers, putting into effect the suburban aspirations of the Old World'.<sup>2</sup> Hugh Stretton, in *Ideas for Australian Cities* (1970), devoted a chapter to considering 'Australia as a Suburb'. Yet this distinctive contribution which Australia has made to civilization has been the object of ridicule by most of its artists and intellectuals, with the exception of Horne, Stretton and very few others. The term *suburbia* is usually used with negative connotations, and images of the suburbs: street names, domestic architecture, interior decoration, garden furniture, household cookery and diurnal rituals have provided most of us at times with a source of innocent amusement. Perhaps we should examine the suburbs and the idea of *suburbia* a little more closely.

It is easy to distinguish city from country in Australia but harder to get a clear view of the suburbs. From the perspective of the old debate between city and country, Australian cities are monolithic entities in which the suburbs are integrated. This is the way Bernard Smith saw

them in his essay 'On Perceiving the Australian Suburb'<sup>3</sup> and his examples are metropolitan, rather than specifically suburban. But to the people who live in them, the suburbs are different from either the city or the country. The sense of inhabiting a third, and perhaps intermediate milieu is a fundamental suburban experience. It is confirmed by regular journeys between suburbs and city, and qualified by a recognition of difference when crossing from one suburb to another. It is useful to acknowledge this common distinction, as Bruce Dawe does in *Sometimes Gladness* (1978),<sup>4</sup> for example, as it reflects the experience of most suburbanites, though perhaps not of the inhabitants of that borderland now often called the 'inner city' which is really the inner suburbs. Some things which appear to be urban (or metropolitan) can, with a change of perspective appear as suburban, and *vice versa*.

A striking quality of the Australian suburbs when viewed from inside is their dynamic variety. Residents of Watson's Bay and Flinders Park, Eltham and Bankstown or Carlton and Sylvania share the common ground of suburban experience, but very little else. They are unlikely even to meet, or explore each others' domain. They may have chosen their particular suburb for reasons of wealth (or the lack of it), snobbery or convenience, but vaguer factors, like an appreciation of the atmosphere of a certain suburban milieu and a feeling that they would be more comfortable there than in another, probably also influenced their choice. The range of difference between suburbs exists within cities and also varies from city to city, because each Australian city has generated a different pattern of suburban development. This is true, at least, of the three in which I have lived.

Because I was born in Adelaide — or rather, in Semaphore, and raised in Colonel Light Gardens — I have no difficulty in distinguishing between city and suburbs. Colonel Light arranged for me, and all residents of Adelaide, by insulating the city square mile with a belt of parklands and consigning the future population to well-defined suburbs, except for the few lucky enough to live in the similarly insulated island of North Adelaide, a suburb most readily comparable with the Garden District of New Orleans, though North Adelaide is more compact and less ostentatious. It was from here that Hugh Stretton wrote his defence of *suburbia*, and this no doubt influenced some of his ideas for Australian cities.

In Melbourne, city and suburbs merge in a belt of industrial suburbs with terrace housing around the centre, beyond which the outer suburbs extend over an enormous area (3,000 km<sup>2</sup>) for the population of just over two and a half million. Melbourne sprawls out from the centre.

Suburban development in Sydney has been determined by its spectacular setting. The harbour shoreline of bays and promontories has (except when it is taken up by the military) created the possibility of something like adjacent 'villages'<sup>5</sup> around the water, and these provide many of the images of Sydney. However, there is something in Les Murray's suggestion<sup>6</sup> that Sydney is a spectacle of emblematic sights which visitors come to see from the country, and even from that other Sydney, west of the Harbour, where most of the inhabitants live, and which contains two of Australia's most famous suburbs: Sarsaparilla and Barranugli.

There are possibly related distinctions, which cannot be pressed too far, between the different ways the suburbs of these three cities have entered into literature. Adelaide has, until recently, remained modestly silent. Melbourne inspired one of the earliest attacks upon the suburbs, Louis Esson's *Song of the Suburbs* (1906) which foreshadowed Barry Humphries' *Wild Life in Suburbia* (1957) by half a century. Sydney's inner and harbour suburbs have provided the setting and even the occasion for a stream of novels and poems.

One of the earliest, Louis Stone's *Jonah* (1911) is probably rightly considered a city novel, for although it is set in the inner suburb of Waterloo, the characters experience their place as central and the suburbs as peripheral:

...among the odd nocturnal sounds of a great city ... the ear caught a continuous rumble in the distance that changed as it grew nearer into the bumping and jolting of a heavy cart.

It was the first of a lumbering procession that had been travelling all night from the outlying suburbs — Botany, Fairfield, Willoughby, Smithfield, St Peters, Woollahra and Double Bay...<sup>7</sup>

In the same book, just a few pages further on, there is a scene at Cremorne Point which foreshadows the idea, prominent in a range of recent commentary on the suburbs from Hugh Stretton to Barry Oakley, that the suburbs are the domain of women (and children) while the city is the sphere of male activity.

Clara ran forward with a cry of pleasure, her troubles forgotten as she saw the harbour lying like a map at her feet. The opposite shore curved into miniature bays, with the spires and towers of the city etched on a filmy blue sky. The mass of bricks and mortar in front was Paddington and Woollahra, leafless and dusty where they had trampled the trees and green grass beneath their feet, the streets cut like furrows in a field of brick. As the eye travelled eastwards from Double Bay to South Head the red roofs became scarcer, alternating with clumps of sombre foliage. Clara looked at the scene with parted lips as she listened to music. ...



From where they sat they could see a fleet of tramps and cargo-boats lying at anchor on their right. Jonah examined them attentively, and then his eyes turned to the city, piled massively in the sunlight, studded with spires and towers and tall chimneys belching smoke into the upper air.<sup>8</sup>

Though Clara surveys the eastern suburbs stretching towards South Head and Jonah's gaze fixes on the centre, they both identify what they see as the *city*.

By the thirties the literary perspective had changed, and this perhaps reflected the development of Australian suburbs in the first decades of this century. Lennie Lower's *Here's Luck* (1930) has a very similar setting to *Jonah*: a neighbourhood of terrace houses near the centre, but in this book it is identified as suburban. 'Money is close in the city and I haven't noticed its proximity in the suburbs,' says Gudgeon at the beginning of the novel,<sup>9</sup> and a lot of the following action seems to be intended as a travesty of suburban life, notably the struggle between houseproud women and undomesticated men, a variation on the theme which associates the suburbs with women. However, in *Here's Luck* the comedy is never a way of ridiculing *suburbia*, for conformism or bad taste, for example, and Mr Gudgeon and his son Stanley manage to live very unconventionally in their suburban habitat.

An inner suburb is the actual subject of Kylie Tennant's *Foveaux* (1939) which charts its decline into a slum and incorporation into the city of Sydney. The novel is notable because Foveaux is seen as a place which originally preserves variety and eccentricity and yet fosters a strong sense of community, so strong, in fact, that those who have grown up in it, but later moved away, are continually drawn back, even in its decline. It has precisely those attributes which are allegedly stifled by *suburbia*, and one character in the novel, the effete, sandal-wearing, self-proclaimed genius Wilfred, is ridiculed for his pretentious opinions about suburban respectability, something which is also refuted by the rich variety of suburban life depicted in the novel.

Christina Stead's Australian novels also reveal a pervasive sense of suburban variety. Fisherman's Bay, and the eastern suburbs all the way in to Woolloomooloo are in the foreground of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and the novel ranges from Annandale to the wooded suburbs of the north shore ('the built-in Paradise forest' as Les Murray puts in a recent poem),<sup>10</sup> from poverty in Paddington to idyllic images of the suburbs along the harbour. However, there is no *suburbia* in this novel, nor in *For Love Alone* (1945). The milieu which Teresa wants to escape, represented in the brilliant description of Malfi's wedding, for example,

is stifling and conventional, but it is not thus characterised because it is suburban.

None of these pre-war Sydney novels mounted the stock attack on *suburbia* and *Foveaux* deliberately pre-empted it. Admittedly none of their settings extended to the western or outer suburbs, but in these years Australians could become familiar with a fictionalised outer suburb through the comic strip *Ginger Meggs*.<sup>11</sup> Bancks obviously took a lot of trouble to elaborate the setting which is prominent in many of the strips. It is unmistakably suburban, with gossiping neighbours, local schools, churches, shopping centres, gangs, commuting fathers and powerful home-loving mothers. It includes a social mix from Ragsey and his family at one end of the scale to Cuthbert Fitzcloon and his protective mother at the other. It is also idyllic — within walking distance of secluded swimming-holes and good fishing — but not quite paradisal, due to the presence of Tiger Kelly and Flogwell the teacher.

The examples I have mentioned so far seem to point to the conclusion that certain suburbs at least escape the blight of respectability, conformity and philistinism, and even mockers of *suburbia* implicitly allow some places of sanctuary secure from its vices. These are usually near the centres of cities, though since about the time of the Bohemian migration to Eltham<sup>12</sup> they have also included select outer suburbs. It is not more dangerously conformist to live in the Diamond Valley electorate than in Pott's Point or St Kilda; no one dare suggest that what goes on behind the suburban terraces of Carlton, Paddington or Balmain is respectable. None of these areas are condemned for philistinism; on the contrary, they are famed for their fashionable style and wit. Perhaps *suburbia* is somewhere in those suburban tracts where artists and the intelligentsia do not congregate, but they are difficult to locate. Closer inspection reveals many of them flourishing like Les Murray in Chatswood and George Dreyfus in Camberwell, the home of Barry Oakley's untrendy Mrs Ryan. Indeed, the suburbs are good places for poetry and musical composition. Away from the main roads they are quiet, and in a suburban house in its own block of land the poet and composer can enjoy long periods of the secluded privacy needed for creative work. If it is difficult to chart *suburbia* this is because it is perhaps not so much a place as an idea and set of attitudes. Australia had suburbs long (though perhaps not very long) before it was blighted by *suburbia*. To discover that, we had to be educated.

Professor David Armstrong thought that one of those who educated us was Barry Humphries.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, his acts began to be noticed around the peak of the post-war campaign of mockery directed at the suburbs for

which Barry Humphries and Patrick White are sometimes thought to be mainly responsible. However, it should not be forgotten how extensive this campaign was. Humphries was initially successful because he dared dramatise attitudes which were widely assumed by the Australian intelligentsia in the two post-war decades. Some of his early admirers also resented him for being clever enough to create popular lampoons out of stylistic clichés they enjoyed impersonating themselves. The criticism and mockery of Australia for being philistine and conformist in ways considered typically suburban infected such intellectual journalism as then existed, from an article by Alan Morehead in *Horizon* in 1947 to the special Australian issue of *London Magazine* in 1962 and beyond.<sup>14</sup> It was a topic in many of the 'state of Australia' books, especially the Jeremiads, as late as Ian Moffitt's *The U-Jack Society* and Robin Boyd's *The Great Great Australian Dream*, both from 1972. By that time the idiom which Barry Humphries had popularised, with its circumlocutions, evasions and blend of formality and solecism, was becoming an easy convention for insinuating ridicule, and it is invoked by Moffitt and Boyd for just this purpose. Amongst all this, however, *Wild Life in Suburbia* (1957), Robin Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), which taught unsuspecting Australians to see the tasteless vulgarity of their architecture and design, and a celebrated passage in George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964),<sup>15</sup> were the popular guides to a rediscovery of Australian suburbia.

It had already been discovered at least once before, by the group of Melbourne writers which forms the subject of David Walker's *Dream and Disillusion* (1976): Louis Esson, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Frederick Sinclair, Frank Wilkott and Esmond Higgins. Inspired perhaps by Louis Esson's attack on suburban attitudes before the First World War, they developed, in the inter-war years, a critique of the suburbs which depicted them as a threat to the Australian ideals and aspirations associated with the *Bulletin* and the nationalist movement of the 1890s. It was in this circle that the word *suburbia* began to be used with negative connotations, and the concept acquired some interesting implications. Sinclair, for example, warned that Australia was in danger of becoming an 'outlandish suburb of England or Europe'<sup>16</sup> and thus linked *suburbia* with colonial deference. It is curious that in the attacks on *suburbia* which developed after the Second World War this argument took an opposite twist. Instead of rejecting the suburbs for betraying Australia's unique destiny, some of the post-war critics attacked them for failing to match overseas standards and buttressed their criticisms by invoking crushing international comparisons, a form of argument which rested on an appeal to the colonial cringe. Robin Boyd, for example, ridiculed the suburban

sprawl of the satellite town of Elizabeth by comparing it unfavourably with the high-density, high-rise Hansa development in West Berlin about the same time.<sup>17</sup> It is not known whether he canvassed the views of any Germans living in the suburban houses of Elizabeth, or in the high-rise apartments of West Berlin, for that matter, but his ploy seemed hard to answer at a time when fewer Australians travelled abroad.

By the post-war years the term *suburbia* had become a cliché, and even defenders of the suburbs like Donald Horne were prepared to admit some of its adverse connotations. What Horne and a few others objected to was the way in which *suburbia* and the images it evoked could be used to dismiss a prominent aspect of Australian civilization without enquiring into its nature. Neither Barry Humphries nor Patrick White were guilty of such shallow simplifications, though both occasionally slipped into mere anti-suburban tirades, as White did in the opening paragraph of 'A Woman's Hand'<sup>18</sup> where a suburban setting is overloaded with prejudicial images which impose a superior, if witty, view on the reader before he can form his own opinion. It is perhaps a tribute to the artistry of both Humphries and White that Moonee Ponds and Sarsaparilla escaped from their creators' clutches and became popular images for ridiculing Australia. Unfortunately, in some areas they have fossilised.<sup>19</sup>

An attempt to rehabilitate the suburbs was made by Hugh Stretton in *Ideas for Australian Cities* (1970), a book which concedes mistakes and infelicities in Australian urban planning but recognizes the potential for life in the typical Australian suburb. Stretton's case emerges strongly when set against the arguments of Robin Boyd, who in *Australia's Home* (1952) offered this characterisation of the home-owner: 'The Australian town-dweller spent a century in the acquisition of his toy: an emasculated garden, a five-roomed cottage of his very own, different from its neighbours by a minor contortion of window or porch — its difference significant to no one but himself.'<sup>20</sup> It is the very last word of that paragraph that mattered to Hugh Stretton. He did not see a house in an enclosed garden as a toy or potential tourist attraction, but as a place to live in, which enlarged the options for individual difference and personal development more than alternate forms of housing, while retaining the possibility of informal community. He was rightly concerned with the extraordinary variety of things which might be going on inside the house, not with how it looked to the passing architect on a tour of inspection.

The passage just quoted from Robin Boyd begins a strange chapter in *Australia's Home* where he tried to diagnose a condition called 'suburban neurosis', implicitly mainly a female complaint, somehow caused by *suburbia*. The problem, as Robin Boyd saw it, seemed to be that woman's



tyranny in the home prevented the man — the home-owner — from enjoying his toy. Odd though this argument is, it acknowledges a characteristic of the suburbs noticed by Donald Horne and others, and taken up by Anne Summers in *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975), that their development reinforced the divisiveness of the sexes in Australia by creating separate spheres of male and female activity. This is recognized by Stretton, and is fundamental to his book, which confronts the fact that suburbs are primarily the domain of women and children and argues that suburban planning and domestic architecture should aim at protecting and increasing their possibilities for full lives. This is an aspect of suburban life (not specifically Australian) which is only glossed by the critics of *suburbia* (by making the suburban stereotype a woman, for example) but explored more sympathetically by Thea Astley, in *Slow Natives* (1965), as well as in other novels, and more recently by Christine Townend, amongst others.<sup>21</sup>

Even while *suburbia* was being ridiculed, childhood in the suburbs, where most Australian growing-up goes on, was imaginatively evoked in a range of works from *Ginger Meggs* to the opening pages of Hal Porter's *Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963), Thomas Keneally's *The Fear* (1965), Barbara Hanrahan's autobiographical novels *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973) and *Kewpie Doll* (1984), and *Puberty Blues* (1979) by Gabrielle Carey and Kathy Lette. The last three recapture the experiences of young girls growing up in suburban milieux which are precisely differentiated in time and place: Barbara Hanrahan's heroine in the unnamed old suburb (which is clearly Thebarton to anyone who knows Adelaide) during the fifties and the girls in *Puberty Blues* in Sylvania during the seventies. All three books, in rather different ways, recreate the suburban experience of place by reference to local institutions and rituals: milk bars, bus journeys, schools, shopping centres, neighbours, intersuburban rivalries, youth clubs or shaggin-waggon. A similar world is suggested in Frank Moorhouse's *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (1977) through the narrator's recollections of his high-school love affair in the aptly named Sydney suburb of Concord. Indeed, the suburbs commonly provide the settings for the dawns of physical love and the first unsatisfactory experiments with sex, and it is often details of the settings for these events — the grandfather's house in a suburban slum, an empty classroom after school, a suburban house temporarily bereft of parents, a drive through residential streets in the back of a van — which assume the prominent place in the protagonist's memory. It is details of just this kind which provoke the idyllic, possibly rose-tinted recollections of the narrator in *Tales of Mystery and Romance*. In that book, as in *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron*

*Balcony*, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* and *Kewpie Doll* whole passages are given over to nostalgic evocations of suburban images. In this respect, far from being the object of ridicule, the suburbs take on some of the qualities of a lost paradise.<sup>22</sup>

There are perceptions of difference in this writing which are missed by the 'suburb-haters' as David David calls them in Peter Mathers *Trap* (1966). To their inhabitants the suburbs are not simply *sub urban*. They are like cells in a vast organism, simultaneously growing in some places and decaying in others, which react, often in unexpected ways, to changes throughout the organism. Instead of the sameness which the critics of *suburbia* thought they saw, we are beginning to discover the distinction of suburban life and realize that a lot of it is mysterious.

Bruce Dawe has captured some of this in 'The Rock-Thrower',<sup>23</sup> for example, and in other poems — 'Homo Suburbienensis' and 'Suburban Lovers' — has explored with sympathy the quality of suburban lives. Peter Carey has discovered the insubstantial nature of suburban landmarks we took for granted, and Murray Bail, concerned more with actions and rituals, has written a few stories which reveal the oddness of ordinary suburban life, as it appears to the man up a gum tree in 'Life of the Party', a story which evokes a rich sense of suburban experience. Its carefully understated tone — though mocking — is saved from mere burlesque by the appropriate strangeness of the situation. It is a subtle advance on Moonee Ponds. These writers do not make the suburbs ridiculous because they are ordinary; rather, they point to mysteries underlying the superficial similarities.

Les Murray has a recent poem which moves from an invocation of suburban images and mood to a definition of the kind of rarely noticed grace which is revealed in equanimity.<sup>24</sup> The poem seems to suggest that this is something which touches suburban lives, but is easily upset when we question it. It is a sign, perhaps, that we are learning to live without suburban achievement.

There is much in the fluidity of suburban life which remains to be imaginatively explored. Suburbs change in relation to each other constantly, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically, like the reversal from centrifugal to centripetal flow in the sixties and seventies as young people sought a new style of life in the inner suburbs. This appears to have been a flight from *suburbia*, since it led to the identification of certain districts: Paddington, Balmain and Carlton, for example, as metropolitan rather than suburban.

This territory has been charted by a number of writers: Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding, Helen Garner and Barry Oakley, amongst

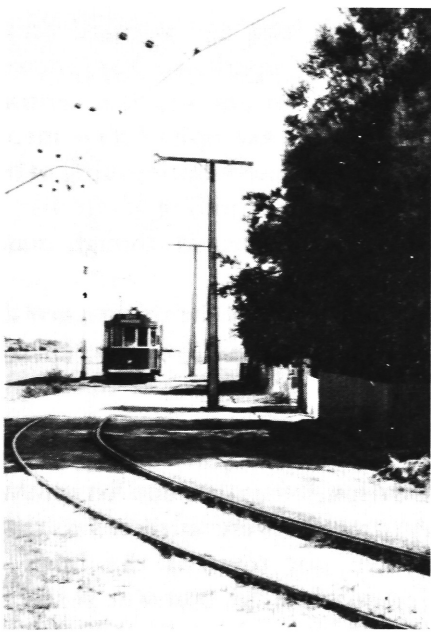
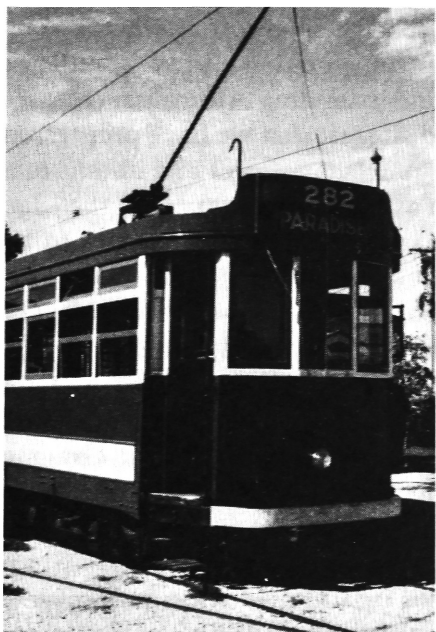


Tram at Paradise Terminus.

**It was the last  
tram to Paradise**



The Last Tram to Paradise, 19 July 1958.





others. However, this is not strictly suburban writing, since it is usually somehow concerned with a sense of being at the centre of things, and it is precisely the sense of *not* being at the centre of things which is the common ground of suburban experience. There is a story by Barry Oakley which turns on precisely this point. 'The Death of Sardanapalus'<sup>25</sup> shifts between Mrs Teresa Ryan, housewife, in Camberwell, and Bob Tartau, her trendy young English tutor, in Fitzroy. Mrs Ryan's world is explicitly suburban — it reverberates shatteringly to the arrival of Bob Tartau on his motor bike, for example — and her anxiety about not being sufficiently fashionable partly explains her attraction to her tutor. His attitudes are those of what has been called 'the new inner city',<sup>26</sup> and he is exposed in the end as a complete phony. The point, of course, depends not on the actual status of the territory, however that might be determined, but upon how it is imagined and depicted in fiction. The areas near the centres of Sydney and Melbourne which do not seem to belong to *suburbia* in the fictions of the writers just mentioned were firmly established as suburban in *Trap*. Peter Mathers focusses on local images and the things people do as inhabitants of a suburb, even to the point of making his diarist-narrator a council employee. *Trap* is pervaded by a strong feeling for the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, and captures the way suburbanites can have a discriminating sense of place.

Not so long ago Bernard Smith raised the question of whether our suburban experience has entered our imagination. It is a difficult problem, but one which is central to understanding Australian culture. Some of the examples I have mentioned suggest that we have progressed beyond the mere burlesquing of a few suburban gestures and idioms to a deeper understanding of our distinction as a suburban nation on the edge of a vast wilderness, though many areas of suburban life remain to be explored.

The writers of the thirties saw the suburbs as a threat to a rural ideal of Australia; Bernard Smith, in the essay just mentioned, reversed the argument and charged that Australia's rural legends created a 'false consciousness' in relation to our suburban reality. Both positions miss the point, recognized by historians like Fred Alexander and Graeme Davison,<sup>27</sup> that the suburbs contained the legend. They grew not because Australians were attracted to the cities, but because city workers were drawn out towards the bush and its possibilities. The suburban Jeremiads of the post-war years, followed by a limited attempt to reverse the process and create an alternative metropolitan culture in what is now called the 'inner city', probably reflect a critical point in Australian

suburban development, but the process is irreversible, and the suburbs will remain the sphere in which Australians create their distinct forms of life.

The last Paradise tram ran over a quarter of a century ago. Its disappearance, like its previous existence, failed to inspire a memorial; apparently no one even thought of photographing it,<sup>28</sup> perhaps because Adelaide took Paradise for granted. The bus which replaced the tram found its way into a story by Murray Bail.<sup>29</sup> Here is its driver, Merv Hector, about to enter Paradise, transformed now, so that it looks a little more suburban:

As usual Hector waited to be thrilled by it, he stared and was ready, but a disappointment spread like the morning shadows. Streets were golden but seemed more like a finished sunset than the beginning of a day. When he stopped the bus it seemed further away — Paradise did. New tiles pointing in the sky spoilt the purity. But Paradise could be close by. It felt close by. The air was light, bright; he was at the edge of something.

#### NOTES

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1. Donald Horne, *The Next Australia* (Sydney, 1970), p. 16; *The Australian People* (Sydney, 1972), p. 188; Graeme Davison, *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* (Carlton, 1978), ch. 7; Robin Boyd, *The Great Australian Dream* (Rushcutters Bay, 1972), p. 50.
2. *The Australian People*, p. 188; *The Next Australia*, p. 143.
3. *The Antipodean Manifesto* (Melbourne, 1976). First published in *Australian Voices: Poetry and Prose of the 1970s*, ed. Rosemary Dobson (Canberra, 1975).
4. The poems in this book are arranged in groups. The first is called 'City'; the second 'Suburbs'. There are a number of others.
5. Fisherman's Bay is called a village in the opening paragraph of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (London, 1934), though it is served by a tram as well as a ferry.
6. In 'Starting from Central Railway — A Bush View of Sydney', originally published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1981. Collected in *Persistence in Folly* (London & Sydney, 1984), pp. 100-104.
7. A & R Classics edition, Sydney, 1976, p. 154.
8. Op. cit., p. 178.
9. A & R Modern Comedies edition, Sydney, 1976, p. 5.

10. 'View of Sydney, Australia, from Gladesville road bridge', second of *The Sydney Highrise Variations* in *The People's Otherworld* (London & Sydney, 1983).
11. See John Horgan, ed., *The Golden Years of Ginger Meggs* (Medindie, 1978) and Barry Andrews, 'Ginger Meggs: His Story' in Susan Dermody, et al., *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends* (Malmsbury, 1982).
12. Some account of this is given by Richard Haese in *Rebels and Precursors* (Ringwood, 1981). See especially pp. 26-29.
13. David Armstrong, sleeve note to *Barry Humphries* (Parlaphone PMEO 9616).
14. Alan Morehead, 'Where Shall John Go? X — Australia', *Horizon*, XV, 86, 1947; *London Magazine*, September 1962; Jack Lindsay, 'The Alienated Australian Intellectual', *Meanjin*, 22, 1963.
15. Chapter 13, pp. 284-285 in Reprint Society edition, London, 1965.
16. Quoted in David Walker, *Dream and Disillusion* (Canberra, 1976), p. 98 and *passim*, esp. ch. 9.
17. *The Australian Ugliness* (rev. ed. Ringwood, 1968), p. 167.
18. Patrick White, *The Cockatoos* (London, 1974), p. 9.
19. In the minds of certain professional Australians, for example. See the review of Barry Humphries by Clive James in the *London Review of Books*, 5, 18, 1983, and the response by Christopher Lloyd in 5, 21, 1983.
20. Melbourne, 1952; Penguin ed. 1968, p. 281.
21. *The Beginning of Everything and the End of Everything Else* (Melbourne, 1974) and *Travels With Myself*, part 1 (Glebe, 1976).
22. See especially the passage in *Kewpie Doll* (London, 1984), pp. 77-78.
23. *Sometimes Gladness* (Melbourne, 1978), pp. 28-29.
24. 'Equanimity' in *Equanimities* (Copenhagen, 1982). Reprinted in *The People's Otherworld* and in *The Vernacular Republic: Poems 1961-1981* (Edinburgh, 1982).
25. Barry Oakly, *Walking Through Tigerland* (St Lucia, 1977).
26. Renate Howe, et al., eds., *The 'New' Inner City* (Belmont, 1978. Deakin University: Australian writers and the city; urban novels series, unit B).
27. Fred Alexander, *Australia Since Federation* (3rd ed., West Melbourne, 1976), pp. 367-368; Graeme Davison, op. cit., pp. 138-140.
28. A search of the Adelaide Archives (where the records of the Metropolitan Tramways Trust are held) and of the picture library of *The Advertiser* in Adelaide failed to produce a photograph to illustrate this essay.
29. 'Paradise' in *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (St Lucia, 1975), pp. 116-117.

## First Love

Emma put the lilies down on the gravestone. Pale-edged on the bullet-coloured slabs, they lay there, momentary fragile offerings.

She stepped back with some satisfaction. Lilies for the dead. The creamy, magnolia-tipped curls of the lilies, with their hard bright stamens, were fitting. Jug lilies, of course. Years ago, when she was a child, her mother had discovered that jug lilies meant death, and she had thrown them all out of the house, tipping out the tall vases, so that the white and gold lilies shot arching into the long grass. Then she had rooted them out of the front garden, from the narrow strip that ran along the verandah, and they later lay in a pile of broken jade leaves and stiff waxy faces turned up to the sun.

That same year her father had slipped away quietly into death. 'So it hadn't done any good, had it Mother?' she'd asked in her child-voice, not knowing then that even the most practical of people can have their little superstitions.

Her mother was a practical person. So was her sister Kate. Her father, she wasn't sure of. She'd been so young when he died. She remembered him as very big and tall, but probably he was no more than ordinary height. He'd worked all his life in Dawson's grain shop, coming home one lunch time to complain of a headache, after which he went to bed to sleep and never woke up again. The doctor said it was something to do with his brain. From then on she was afraid every night before falling asleep, and pleaded with the sky

'If I should die before I wake  
take me to heaven for Jesus' sake.'

Her mother coped. Sold the house, bought a smaller one, took in a couple of lodgers (nice young schoolteachers) and gave more piano lessons. Later she ripped out the flowers and grew vegetables and sold them to the local shops. Sunday was a day of rest, however, with church in the morning and a visit to their father in the cemetery in the afternoon.

So Emma knew the cemetery quite well. For over fifty years she'd been coming here once a week. Things had changed since then. Expansion. The council had bought a couple of farms at the back of the cemetery, and the spires and spikes of new graves rose up in the distance. Styles of gravestones had changed, too, for another thing. Once they'd all been pale angels, cherubs and marble-like saints with harps and gently folding drapes. Now they were brisk and trim no-nonsense grey blocks where the occupants could lie sedately waiting for Judgment Day.

Not that she was really religious, despite all her churchgoing. She knew the Book of Common Prayer off by heart, but it had never helped her in a crisis. She had never felt the Hand of God, as people called it, on her life, unless, as she sometimes joked to herself, it was the particularly heavy hand of God. She played the organ every week in the church, helped arrange the flowers (growing flowers was one of her passions), was present at all the festivals and fetes, but still she felt apart. As she played in the church, she would look up at the other worshippers at prayer or at hymn, and wonder if they had this dreadful emptiness as well. She would look at the minister, seemingly so convinced, his face rapt as he delivered the blessing

the peace of God that passeth all understanding

and wondered if he had his doubts as well. Perhaps they all did, and never admitted to one another, and kept going in this vast wash of conspiracy.

Despite all this, she was happy that the family grave was in the old section of the cemetery, amongst the harps and angels. It was more beautiful for her taste than the functional new section. And having somewhere to visit, to place her thoughts, was somehow comforting, so she continued to bring her masses of flowers, and she often felt closer to her mother and sister here, than she had when they were alive. She could almost hear their voices in the still crystal air, commenting on her life, on her thoughts. Particularly on hot days, she thought, when one is inclined to feel a little light-headed anyway. Recalling this, she was glad that she had brought her sun-hat and her thermos of iced tea, because the sun was beginning to steam up, and she didn't want to overdo it. She sat down on a slab and unscrewed the top of the thermos, and poured out a cup of black sweetened tea, and started to sip it. The only trouble was, tea made you wee a lot, so you had to take it easy. Fortunately, their section was near a ladies' lavatory, although she wouldn't like to use it, unless in an emergency, because you heard dreadful stories of killers dressed up as

women and lurking in lavatories, or else drug-runners, also dressed up as women, who would whisk you off to the white slave market. She sighed and took another sip. She supposed she was a bit old for the white slave trade anyway. But she was cheered by the fact that, when she'd arrived, she's seen the backs of two gravediggers going into the new section. They would be in earshot, if she screamed. She took another sip, settled back and relaxed.

But as she sat there drinking, she had a sudden urgent need to go to the toilet. She would have to brave the spiders and the men dressed up, and use the public lavatory. She hurried over, casting an anxious look towards the new section where she hoped the gravediggers were still working.

Neither creepy crawlies nor strange transvestites lurked in the loo. It was perfectly clean. It probably didn't get used much, of course, she mused. In her time she had known a good number of cemetery attendants. 'I like it,' one had said. 'Nice quiet job.'

'Couldn't get much quieter,' she'd agreed.

A nice quiet job, that's what she'd had in a way. A nice quiet life. Only it hadn't felt happy at all, safely stitched into a nice quiet life. Only it hadn't felt happy. She had been as flattened and as dead as a sardine in a tin. Today, she had done the most adventurous thing of her life, murder and mayhem and maybe a fate worse than death by using a public lavatory, which would have shocked her mother had she known. For her mother had advised caution in this area, stressing that only Myers Emporium in Melbourne had safe toilets on the fourth floor, where men didn't dress up as women. As a result, they'd all developed weak bladder sphincters from walking miles in search of a suitably safe lavatory.

At least, she thought, returning to the lilies, with her family she had somewhere to come, an altar for her feelings. With Reggie, there was no such altar, and yet she needed it. When her father had died and her mother had explained that he'd been taken up to Heaven by God, she could only imagine it as a wisp of smoke escaping from the wood, and floating high in dandelion puffs to scatter in the wind. That was the soul unseen in all of us, that could slip like silk into the void. Where was Reggie then? Not securely encased in a family tomb. But somewhere on a beach. Or a desert. Or a jungle, or anywhere. Missing in Action was his official destination. Somewhere, whitened bones. For years, she had prayed that he would come back, like some other soldiers had come, walking back into their old lives, to wives and sweethearts and mothers. She had prayed to the proud, absolute God of the Book of Common Prayer, but the only answer she had got was 'God's will'. Had Reggie

died in order that God's will be done? Was her life God's will? She supposed a truly religious outlook would say yes. God's will, fate, destiny, in the hands of God. And yet, she thought, as she drained the lid of the thermos flask that served as a cup, there was something human and wild and primitive in everyone that cried out, 'Why me? Why me? I want something better.'

will ye no come back again?  
better lo'ed ye canna be

The children's voices had floated out across the high-scholl hall for years after the war, singing the songs she'd taught them as their music teacher, and each time she'd played certain songs she'd thought of Reggie.

better lo'ed ye canna be  
will ye no come back again?

In fact, she often chose the songs deliberately, to allow herself some private release of emotion. She had no one to talk about it with at home. Kate and Mother hadn't liked Reggie much. Moreover, Kate didn't go in for boys and Mother, while still wearing mourning for father, was convinced that only he, as a truly remarkable man, was worthy of such emotion. Other men, she often said, 'you could take 'em or leave 'em, and preferably leave 'em.' In films, of course, there were happy endings. Even Missing-in-Action men came home, to bands and flags and ticker tape. In their small country town the five men missing never came back. And yet their relations didn't stop hoping for years. It was better to be missing in action than definitely classified dead. With missing in action there was still hope. That was the way she'd first heard it from Mrs Gough.

'His mother's just got the news. He's Missing in Action. Course, there's always hope. He might be a Prisoner of War somewhere. They'll have to wait until the end of the war, of course.'

After the first shock of fear, there came the wave of wild hope. Yes, he could still be alive, somewhere. And because Mrs Gough didn't know about her and Reggie, she didn't want her to see her tears so she'd rushed off home. Mother wasn't in when she'd got back, but Kate had just got in from the garden and was pulling off her gardening gloves. Kate was busy in those days, having just started a poultry run, selling eggs and chickens to the local shops, and she had mostly taken over the

garden from their mother. She spent the day in a smock with a scarf wrapped tightly around her head.

Kate's first words seared her.

'Well, he was never much good to anyone...'

And as she had stood there, frozen, in the little kitchen, Kate had even gone on,

'Except, perhaps, to Aileen Hobbs.'

Her horrified look must have been noticeable, even to Kate, who said impatiently, as she rinsed her hands at the sink

'Come on, Em, don't pretend. You know what I'm talking about.'

She'd gone to bed that day with a sick headache, and for the first time in her life she'd wished that, like her father, she'd never wake up. But she did, and when she did her mother said that work was the answer. So mother ordered a new copper plate for her, to go underneath hers on the door. It read,

Miss Emma Whitehead

Music Teacher

Pianoforte and Organ

Beginners and Advanced.

So she had gone on teaching music, dreaming her private life. She felt somewhat envious of the married women she knew. Of course, marriage gave status. And intimacy. Sometimes she felt she was stepping out of her life and looking at it, a celluloid fantasy, as one would a film. Did other people feel like this from time to time, she wondered? She supposed that this must be one of the distinct advantages of being married — you could share all sorts of intimate secrets with another person and he with you. Another person's private vision. You would be privileged to share that. Sometimes the loneliness and intensity made her want to lean over towards strangers in cafes and say things like,

'I'm lonely, are you?' or 'My life didn't turn out like I dreamed it, did yours?'

But of course, only mad people spoke like that, so instead she leaned forward and asked people to pass the salt, please, and hoped that they would strike up a conversation which they didn't or if they did pass a remark, it was about the weather.

There was once an exception to this. Once a man had come and sat at her table in a cafe. She had never seen him before, and thought him an uncommon person for the countryside; more like a university person or a



social worker she thought, studying his longish hair and dark beard and old duffle coat. Not a farmer, definitely not a farmer. She was surprised when he leaned over towards her and said,

‘It’s wet and depressing today, isn’t it?’

She hesitated.

‘Er..yes. It is.’

‘A good day for a suicide.’

Perhaps he’d been drinking, she’d thought. Better humour him.

‘I mean,’ she went on, ‘it’s depressing but not bad for suicide.’

‘How bad does it have to be for you to do yourself in?’

‘Pardon?’

‘I suppose you’re one of those happy types. The sort that builds their life on compromise.’

‘Well, er no..’

She had stared at him, not believing the conversation. The conversation of her life had arrived but he was a bit drunk. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

‘Happiness is not what we mortals are destined for. Only we don’t find that out until we’ve broken our backs trying to get it.’ His voice was getting rather loud. ‘Do you know that one of the lessons of life is to learn to do without dreams? Yes, it is. Once we realize this, we must go around stamping them out, one by one, like the birds’ nests that boys find in the long grass and grind out with their heels.’ His voice was very loud now.

‘Could you speak a little more quietly?’ she whispered.

‘And the thing is, I can’t live without my dreams.’

Nor can I, she wanted to cry. But instead she said,

‘Oh no, surely not.’

He got up quickly.

‘Well, no point going on about it to you. You don’t understand, obviously. Anyway, it’s a good day for it.’

‘For what?’

‘For finishing it all.’

Everybody was looking at them by now.

‘Stop. Don’t go,’ she said, but he was already out the door. She wanted to run after him, to stop. But everyone was looking at her. They’d think she was mad if she ran after him.

She never forgot him. Perhaps she could have saved his life. A man was fished out of the Yarra the next day, and his description was broadcast on the wireless. It fitted the man in the cafe. And all the time that she’d been listening to him and agreeing with him silently, he’d thought he’d been alone. Which brought her back to marriage. It seemed

to her that this was the only place where one could be perfectly frank. Sometimes she watched couples in cafes, seemingly enjoying this sort of intimacy. She preferred couples of her own age. But usually their conversation, when overheard, was mundane. Except once a woman with a sad white face and a shock of grey hair around her like a spider's web, had said as Emma passed,

'But the baby died, and I never had another one, no matter how hard I tried. I was depressed for years.'

Emma had been jolted by the open confession, unable to imagine herself talking so freely. She wondered who the elderly man was that the woman was telling. Not her husband, obviously. After, Emma went home to conversations with Kate and Mother about potatoes and poultry and pianoforte.

Sometimes, she wondered why she was different from Kate. Kate had never worried about being plain and unloved. Kate had never even had a Reggie to dream about. Kate never dreamt. Even as a child she had only accepted what she could see, refusing to play the games of fantasy that Emma loved. 'It's not true, it's not real, it's not a real fairy place, it's only a tree,' she would say.

Meanwhile, Emma kept on choosing songs for Reggie, for her high school girls.

vair me o-or-o van o  
vair me o-or-o van ee  
vair me o-or-o  
sad am I without thee

The children sang out obediently. Sometimes she chose brighter tunes, but still on the same theme.

skip we gaily on we go  
heel for heel and toe for toe  
arm in arm and round we go  
all for Mairi's wedding

As time went on and Emma became an unmarried lady of certain age, she wore dark sober clothes and some of the high school girls used to ask her why she'd never got married. She let it slip deliberately that she'd had a young man but he'd perished in the war. She put hyacinths on the piano in memory of him. In some ways, this revelation boosted her in the eyes of the girls, as she knew it would. She wasn't just any old maid. On

the other hand, she caught them sometimes exchanging sly, malicious grins as they launched into her favourite songs.

sad am I without thee

Then a new generation of teachers had come to the school, resilient young women, bright and fearless as daisies, who said it wasn't necessary to have a husband to be happy. Some of them were wild girls, she believed, and lived their lives like Aileen Hobbs. They should have come to a bad end, according to her upbringing, yet they survived. She envied them now. Perhaps her life would have been different if there'd been feminists in her day. Perhaps she would have spoken to strangers in cafes, left home, even had a close friendship with a man. But it was too late for her now. Now she grew flowers and crocheted bedspreads for the church fete, and visited the cemetery once a week.

Now, at the graveside, Emma fanned herself with a lace handkerchief she took from her pocket. Suddenly, Kate's voice came sharp as a file.

Emma was always a bit of a romantic fool. Even when we were girls together and she was making cows' eyes at that awful Reggie Green. He wasn't interested, that was plain enough. Although he did hang around a bit for a while, looking for what he could get. And all the time running around with that dreadful Aileen Hobbs, with Emma pretending not to notice. She could talk herself into anything, a proper romantic fool.

'That's not right, Kate,' she said aloud, into the still warm air. 'He did love me.' She thought back. Their love had been pure. He'd respected her. Not that he hadn't tried anything, of course. But she hadn't given in. He'd respected that, she knew. They were all taught what men thought of women who were easy. 'Easy meat,' her mother had said one Sunday night, about Aileen Hobbs, while picking up the sharp knife to carve the remains of the cold Sunday roast. Sliver, sliver, the dark brown slices had shuddered onto the plate together with the piles of slimy green gherkins and blood-red tomatoes, their cold cuts and salad for Sunday evening. 'You seem to have lost your appetite,' her mother had remarked, noticing her untouched plate.

'Lovesick,' Kate had said, slyly.

Her mother's words had put her off trying anything with Reggie. She'd always regretted it afterwards.

She was suddenly aware that she had spoken out loud and she looked

around nervously. Fortunately, there was no one around, or they'd think she was touched. Of course, it was a habit, talking to oneself, a habit you got into when you lived alone, and she supposed the voices were the same sort of thing. They weren't real voices, of course, like Joan of Arc heard, speaking from God, or like the greengrocer or ordinary people, and she knew her mother and Kate were dead and buried. Yet when she sat here she could hear them clear as bells on the night air.

Her mother struck up then, vibrato.

Of both my daughters Emma was the one I worried about most. Kate always had her head screwed on right. Feet on the ground. The practical one. And yet, funnily enough, when they were girls, I didn't worry about Em at all. She was the bright one. I had hopes for her. Kate was fairly good at the piano, but slower at picking things up. But as Em grew, I started to worry about her. Head in the clouds. Always day-dreaming. Crying for the moon, I suppose. Made her discontented.

'Look Mum, angels! Can they fly?' a small voice broke her thoughts. Emma looked up and saw a man and a woman with a little boy walking through the old section. Time she went home, she thought. Her ankles were swelling in the heat, and her head was starting to ache. She got up stiffly. If Reggie were here with her, they would probably drive off somewhere together, perhaps go for a picnic. Instead, she would climb into her old Morris Minor and go back to the town to do her watering in the evening. She remembered the lodger Dave who used to do the watering for her of an evening. She'd taken him in after her mother and sister had died. He bore a remarkable resemblance to Reggie. She was very happy with him pottering around, and tinkering with his motorbike, but then he started bringing girls home to stay the night and she reluctantly had to ask him to leave.

She turned heavily to make her way back. An uncanny resemblance, Dave and Reggie, she thought, as a man came towards her. She peered through the bright sunlight and then blinked and peered again. It was Dave. No Reggie. Don't be silly, of course it wasn't Reggie... Yes it was, the same face, the same slope of his neck. Her eyes were playing tricks on her, she told herself. She'd had too much sun. She hurried forward. Yes, his features were sharper, clearer, those of Reggie. At the same time she told herself to stop thinking and go into the shade, and have some rest. But her head was spinning. She started to run.

The young gravedigger, coming back from the new section, where he'd just finished digging a grave, told his boss what had happened.

'This old lady came running towards me, calling out «Reggie, Reggie.» I looked behind me, thinking there must be someone else she was waving to, but there was only me. As she got up to me, I started to say, «My name's not Reggie», but she threw up her arms like she was going to hug me, and as she did that, she must have tripped, and she went flying. She hit her head on that rock over there. I ran to get help, but when the doctor came he said there was nothing that could be done. After she fell, she never moved. Funny though, she just lay there, looking peaceful, sort of smiling to herself.'

As he turned away, his eyes caught on the lilies, arranged neatly on the gravestone. He disapproved. People always brought fresh flowers which died off so quickly. These lilies, for instance. Although they looked strong and waxy, like the plastic flowers he preferred, they were already turning yellow in the heat, tingeing on the edges, curling into an orange frill. It was sad. Nothing lasted.

## Katherine Gallagher

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### FIRSTBORN

For years I dreamt you  
my lost child, a face unpromised.  
I gathered you in, gambling,  
making maps over your head.  
You were the beginning of a wish  
and when I finally held you,  
like some mother-cat I looked you over —  
my dozy lone-traveller set down at last.

So much for maps,  
I tried to etch you in, little stranger  
wrapped like a Japanese doll.

You opened your fish-eyes and stared,  
slowly your bunched fists  
bracing on air.



Illustration: Paul Vella

## For Better, or for Worse

'I'll get rid of 'er yet,' Henry sneered boastfully. 'Mark my words! She will leave the house of 'er own accord.' Streaky stood beside him not knowing how to react to Henry's vengeful mood, and finally nodded his head, musing over his glass on the counter. 'Yes,' he murmured blearily, 'these women'll send us to our grave,' guessing that such a philosophy would please Henry's ear. And it did; his face became quite red with the excited recollection of his last dreadful encounter with Eva.

A blanket of smoke and the hum of familiar voices encircled the two friends. They could feel at ease here amongst their mates. They had all known each other for years. In the corner, near the jukebox, sat five or six youths ('upstarts', they called them) with some painted floosies. Henry's friend caught sight of them now and thought they would make a good change in conversation. He and Henry could talk about these youngsters for hours. 'Look at them all now...' he complained, swaying slightly, but Henry cut him short.

'D'ya know what that old raven said to me terday? She said I was a lousy —! What d'ya reckon? Me, who's slaved all these years so that madam could have everything, even a television set. And remember the washing machine I bought 'er last winter?'

'But that was second hand! And didn't 'er aunt leave 'er the TV when she died? I remember last winter — we were standing at this very counter when you told me...' His mouth froze, still half open, as he glanced up at his friend from the amber depths of his beer. For Henry looked really mad, maybe he shouldn't have been so ready to correct him. No, this could have been the wrong time for such recollections! But before he could utter a conciliatory phrase, Henry disappeared out of the pub door. Oh, well, he couldn't help it if Henry got shirty over such a trifle. He would make up with him tomorrow. Henry was sure to be here again after he knocked off work from the wharves, and then he'd slap him on the back and let him know that there were no hard feelings. And it would all be forgotten. Henry, he mused resentfully, had a very nasty temper.

Eva sat in front of the television. She hadn't heard the door open. Henry usually made a clatter when he arrived home, giving her fair warning to be out of the lounge and 'asleep' in her room. It had come to that between them. Tonight she hadn't really been able to concentrate on the film; her thoughts had kept straying back to Henry and his ever more frequent angry outbursts. She had been brooding over their lives, trying to discover where they had gone wrong. She had only just reached the conclusion that she could have in some way made their marriage more pleasant, when heavy footsteps on the kitchen lino startled her out of her reflections.

'Oh,' she exclaimed. And then, more gently, 'It's you.'

He didn't reply, but stood with the refrigerator door ajar, staring at the empty racks.

'Why is there no beer in this house?' he roared suddenly.

'You only gave me fifteen dollars last Friday...' she replied.

He stood there, hands shoved deep in his trouser pockets, his protruding stomach pushed out even further in a show of strength, as he slowly and venomously lashed out his vindictive sentence. Then he slammed the door and went to his room. 'No electricity from tomorrow, did he say? Has he gone mad?'

Blinded by sudden tears, she made her way through the narrow corridor to her own room. Closing the door behind her, she collapsed on her bed, her back heaving convulsively as she sobbed. 'He wants me to leave,' she thought. 'He wants to freeze me out. No electricity, not enough money for groceries...'

She had brought up their children and made do with the little money which had been left over from his daily visits to the pub. And now, at fifty-seven, she was used up and dismissed. She relaxed a little on the bed, finding a comfortable position for her legs. Then, as the thought passed through her mind, a faint glint started to shimmer in her eyes, and she went to sleep with an innocent smile still quivering on her lips, in peace for the first time in many years.

'No hard feelings, mate?' asked Streaky, placing a calloused hand on his friend's fat shoulders. And Henry, warmed by the gesture, replied by calling the barmaid over to their side of the counter.

'Two of the usual please, Elsie,' he boomed. Then, with the two glasses still frothing over he led the way over to a table. Streaky followed him. Henry manoeuvred his huge, sweaty bulk through the crowd, exhaling noisily as he lowered himself onto the stool. Streaky sat down



opposite him and waited quietly for Henry to speak. His friend was in high humour today, he could tell. Sipping the froth of his beer, Henry assumed a sullen, pensive air, prolonging the silence and relishing Streaky's barely suppressed expectancy.

'I'm gonna be a free man soon, mate,' he finally began. 'I see no reason ter support a woman who does nothin' all day. And when I arrive home dog-tired and needin' to relax, she's instantly at me throat — that's the only thanks I get!' He paused dramatically, then leant over the table confidently,

'I went to the County Council terday an' asked 'em to cut off the electricity. I'm hardly ever home, anyway, thanks ter 'er naggin', and d'ya know, she said nothin' when I told 'er. Nothin' at all!'

Streaky didn't know what to say. Henry obviously wanted his reassurance. Then, finally, he conceded,

'You're right, mate, it's no fun having these whinin' females around our necks. All they're ever good for is to put a bad conscience in a good bloke.'

Henry's face glowed. So Streaky felt the same way! Henry was sure, he'd done the right thing. He always did. He had a reputation among the boys — honest, dependable cobbler, that's what his mates thought of him! Hadn't he broken up that fight last Easter outside on the footpath...?

Eva heard his shuffling approach on the gravel outside. She remembered how they had spread the gravel together one Sunday afternoon, while the kids whooped around them excitedly, eager to offer their help. In those days, Henry had been a different man, he had shown in lots of little ways that he cared. She dished the sausages and potatoes up on a plate and placed it on the dining-table. Henry came into the kitchen and sat down. There was a tense silence, punctuated by the knife and fork scraping on the plate. Finally he opened his paper noisily and propped it against the sauce bottle, reading as he ate. When he had finished, he got up heavily, and opened the refrigerator. Eva wondered if it was from force of habit, or if he was just making sure that the power had been cut off. Then, with a satisfied grunt, he picked up his paper and went out the door.

The next day's dinner progressed in much the same way. Eva, Henry noticed, looked rather pale. The sight of her face caused him a momentary twinge, but remembering his plan, he escaped to the solace of the pub and his friends.

Streaky was waiting for him at the bar. He saw Henry enter and thought for a moment that he looked a bit strange. Sort of greyish, a bit green around the gills. He had even noticed it yesterday.

‘How’ve ya been?’ he greeted him, masking his concern. Henry was a vain man, always boasting of his good health.

‘All right, mate,’ Henry replied, then turned to the barmaid to order his beer. ‘Feel a bit seedy,’ he thought to himself. ‘Sausages might’ve been a bit off...’ remembering the fridge. He went home early that night. Somehow his usual enthusiasm had been lacking; Streaky had actually left him at the bar and had gone off to talk to the other blokes about the weekend races. When he got home he felt his way through the dark hallway and fell exhausted into his bed, not bothering to undress. Later that night, Eva heard him in the bathroom, retching violently. He didn’t go to work the next day, but by dinner time he felt well enough to eat.

‘The sausages might’ve been a bit off last night,’ he offered, as Eva carried his plate to his bed. But she remained silent and her face was unyielding as she left the room. After his meal, Henry went to the bathroom to spruce up. He was determined to feel well tonight. As he walked the block to the pub he took a deep breath, noticing the flowers in the neighbour’s garden for the first time in years. He decided that he would look after his health from now on. At his age he shouldn’t take his health for granted! But again that night the cheerfulness was missing from his voice, and at times he saw black patches floating in front of his eyes. He didn’t feel well. ‘Must be a wog,’ he confided to Streaky. The blokes had moved a few feet away from him, their voices hushed as if his mere presence was disturbing their conviviality. He went home early again.

The next day he could not get out of bed. Two weeks went by. Henry didn’t seem to get any better. Around noon of each day he would pick up a little, but by nightfall he would feel worse again. Streaky went to visit him one evening, but was too embarrassed to stay more than a few minutes. There had been a painful silence between them. He didn’t come again.

One day Eva called the doctor. After examining Henry he informed her that Henry’s heart had taken a bad turn. It was probably all the years of neglect. ‘A steady diet of beer...’ he had hinted professionally.

On the night following the visitation, Henry’s condition suddenly deteriorated. The doctor arrived just in time to take his last feeble pulse. Consoling, he placed a hand on Eva’s slight, slumping shoulders.

'You have done all you could, my dear. Please don't torment yourself,' he added as he noticed silent tears rolling down her furrowed cheeks.

'No one could have done anything for him. He had only himself to blame for this kind of end.'

Then he went down the hall, placing his hat on his head. With a final, sympathetic glance at Eva, he left.

She stood by the closed door for a long time, as if lost in thought. Then, slowly, a smile spread across her thin face and she whispered gently to herself,

'Yes. He had only himself to blame...'

## Geoff Page

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### TWO STEP FOR JIM LEE

First year out  
as teachers say  
first year in  
a wild west high  
where kids fired bobby  
pins not pellets  
first year out  
in wood and fibro  
a bachelors' house  
with divorcee  
who wore always  
a failed kimono  
and had an 'under-  
standing' with her  
gentleman SP

the rent just three  
pound ten a week  
in currency  
called back and burnt.

Each day I caught  
a bus with kids  
and swung home on the  
train through Granville  
and on my wide  
ironic bed  
rebuilt an ego  
limb by limb  
from shards that Form 2  
hadn't stolen  
wrote up hopeful  
notes for lessons  
that never quite  
were given.

Thirty tons of  
Auburn solids  
fell from the sky  
per acre of ground  
not all of it on  
the white drip-dries  
I offered upwards  
from the clothesline.  
With half my life  
in institutions  
(chin-ups for the  
bourgeoisie)  
I boiled an egg hard  
every morning  
leathery as maxims.

Nearest to a  
friend all year  
was old Jim Lee  
across the lino  
who ran the ever-  
greens each night

(accordion now  
instead of piano).  
He'd worked the Cunards  
in the thirties  
and conjured as you  
stood and watched  
wire brushes on a  
weathered snare  
a dance floor edged  
with weighted palms  
and open to the stars.

He had a clerk's hole  
now somewhere  
and offered sticky  
port in jars  
warned against women.

I had some drums there  
with my suitcase  
sailing high  
on the wardrobe top  
to practise though  
my split a door  
six rooms would be  
as many tom-toms.

Told by chance  
of my parole  
he bought an opener  
from Coles  
and scratched on it a  
stave with quavers  
that old two-bob-  
each-way advice

*Moderato Ma*

*Non Troppo*

a motto close  
as any other  
I'd try for twenty  
years or life.

# Richard Kelly Tipping

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## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN POEMS

for Nicholas, my brother

### PORT JULIA

flat slap of sand and oozing ochre cliffs  
vibrant as the barbeque on wheatfield's edge  
with the farmhouse on holidays and six nurses  
calling the shots: loin lamb chops sizzling  
under slabs of dripping-fresh pineapple  
— a nip of rye, with rainwater —  
kicking a soccerball high, in a paddock of onionweed  
and soursobs ... 'Chase me!' ... a child's strong cry:  
the meaning of everything suddenly seen  
as a Horwood & Bagshaw Harvester, greased, rusted  
earth brown, waiting in the half-ripe wheat,  
late winter.

### RAPID BAY

The beach is so wide you start to disappear  
zooming across sand, eating land  
like an ant on a banana cake heading for the obvious  
gaping cave, forcing you like a juicy tourist bus  
into the only motel — into the earth-gut

twinge of piss and empty bottles, for the gypsum  
shouting from the smokeblack walls ...  
They're mining alright, at the other end of the beach,  
a whole poem away. The couple by their Range Rover  
boiling a cuppa are right out of the ad: politics  
as the progression of selfishness from stateless  
to status and how come i've missed out?  
Nick, you're incorrigible.

## GLIDING NEAR GAWLER

Van Gogh would grasp this swirling sky  
of colours on an empty canvas sown...  
late afternoon's slow-kindling fires  
awash with winter hues: orange, vermillion,  
grey, pink, blue: the moment hugs you to it —  
in air we live, in earth we will lie.

Lean blades of wing and cockpit's rotund eye  
the gliders pulling from green ground  
till the cord is snapped, the tow plane dives  
and all horizons vertical, overwhelming  
silences, in the whack of air and rolling winds  
that lift a human thought into lasting flight.

## CAPE JERVIS

We came from the winging ridge  
that rollercoasts through flashing green  
down in a gasp to blue —  
land's end, the Southern Ocean's smashed  
grey-blue and a horizon that bends  
holding Kangaroo Island proudly, at a distance.

On a scarf and wool coat day, the ferry wasn't.  
Two pelicans on serious round rocks agreed.  
The seagulls stayed optimistic, didn't avocado;  
the mysteries of seaweed, stone and shell  
all beacons of substance, in our child's eyes  
the sponges were satellites: the tractors still  
in a semicircle, hogging that little beach,  
holding their boat trailers out like hands  
for the fishermen of Backstairs Passage.

## WILD HOPS, THE FLINDERS RANGES

the wild  
hops, red  
swathes  
of desert mountain  
flowers, mid-Spring  
on gate-opening  
backroads,  
splooshing the ochre  
Holden through  
glass-clear creeks  
to Chambers Gorge  
late raw sun  
jumping across  
river-soak shallows  
rock water reeds  
wide gully wall  
aboriginal ancient  
overpowering cliffs  
seven skin-taut bone  
shot corpses  
kangaroo  
the heedless scrawking  
of 100 white cockatoos



## HACKNEY

The mornings are corkscrew tight:  
just-Spring in Adelaide  
and all the flowers shouting —  
almond jasmine wattle nectarine...

shocks of bright weed, over  
thrown with caterpillars, rich  
Wanderers\* in brown fur coats —  
streets spattered with petals

on parked cars, sun-split clouds  
and still-leaking rooves, red wine  
in hand-me-down houses —  
the lions roaring from the zoo.

\*) 'Wanderers' = the Monarch butterfly.

# First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature

In the autumn of 1981 I went to a conference in Mainz. The theme of the conference was 'The Role of Women in Africa'; it was a traditional academic conference and proceeded in an orderly fashion with papers on various aspects of the subject and not too much discussion until the last day of the conference when a group of young German feminists had been invited to participate. They dismissed the professor who up until then had chaired the session (he was a man), installed a very articulate student as chairwoman, and proceeded to turn the meeting into a series of personal statements and comments in the tradition of feminist movement meetings. They discussed Verena Stefan's book *Shedding*<sup>1</sup> with its radical feminist solution, and they debated their relationship to their mothers, in terms of whether they should raise their mothers' consciousness and teach them to object to their fathers or whether perhaps it was best to leave them alone. The African women listened for a while, and then they told their German sisters how inexplicably close they felt to their mothers/daughters, and how neither group would dream of making a decision of importance without first consulting the other group. This was not a dialogue! It was two very different voices shouting in the wilderness, and it pointed out to me very clearly that universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition as much as perhaps a goal to work towards, and that in that process it is important to isolate the problems which are specific to Africa or perhaps the Third World in general, and also perhaps to accept a different hierarchy of importance in which the mother/daughter relationship would be somewhat downgraded.

One obvious and very important area of difference is this: whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural

Whilst there is not a lot, there is some explicit discussion about the subject. The Malawian poet Felix Mnthali states one view very clearly in a poem called 'Letter to a Feminist Friend':<sup>2</sup>

My world has been raped  
looted  
and squeezed  
by Europe and America  
and I have been scattered  
over three continents  
to please Europe and America

Why should they be allowed  
to come between us?  
You and I were slaves together  
uprooted and humiliated together  
Rapes and lynchings —

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do your friends 'in the movement'  
understand these things?

...

No, no, my sister,  
                    my love,  
first things first!  
Too many gangsters  
still stalk this continent  
too many pirates  
too many looters  
far too many  
still stalk this land —

...

When Africa  
at home and across the seas  
is truly free  
there will be time for me  
and time for you  
to share the cooking  
and change the nappies —  
till then,  
first things first!

To this the Nigerian lecturer at Ibadan, Leslie Molaria Ogundipe, answers in a paper called 'Women in Nigeria'.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting, she says, to notice that it is *his* world that has been raped and looted, and she points out that cultural liberation cannot be separated from women's liberation and that the problems of polygamy, women's role in the economy, their education and legal status have to be considered as aspects of the national struggle. Nadine Gordimer discusses the same problem in *Burger's Daughter* in which she is very dismissive about the possible role of a South African women's movement which crosses the colour and class barriers. However, black African writers who might wish to make the condition or role of women the subject of their fiction face a problem, which I think is uniquely theirs.

An important impetus behind the wave of African writing which started in the '60s was the desire to show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether a worthy heritage. This was obviously opting for fighting cultural imperialism, and in the course of that the women's issue was not only ignored — a fate which would have allowed it to surface when the

time was ripe — it was conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence. The African past was not made the object of a critical scrutiny the way the past tends to be in societies with a more harmonious development, it was made the object of a quest, and the picture of women's place and role in these societies had to support this quest and was consequently lent more dignity and described in more positive terms than reality warranted. Achebe's much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praiseworthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in traditional wisdom behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being. My sense of humour has always stopped short at the pleasant little joke about Okonkwo being punished, not for beating his wife, but for beating her during the week of peace.<sup>4</sup> The obvious inequality of the sexes seems to be the subject of mild amusement for Achebe.

If Achebe is obviously quite contented with the unequal state of affairs, Okot p'Bitek takes this tendency a step further and elevates his female protagonist, Lawino, into the very principle of traditional ways. I find this book a very sinister double take. Lawino is secured the reader's sympathy in her verbal battle with her husband, mainly because he is so obviously weak, insincere and cruel, but then our sympathy for her is forced to become a sympathy for the traditional society she exemplifies, and Bitek makes her not only embrace, but positively eulogize the sexual organization of her traditional society and her own subservient role in a polygamous setting:

When I have another woman  
with whom I share my husband  
I am glad.  
A woman who is jealous  
of another with whom she shares a man  
is jealous because she is slow  
lazy and shy  
because she is cold weak and clumsy<sup>5</sup>

This I see as a male writer deliberately misusing the persona of a female character to extol a grossly sexist system, which is obviously completely to his satisfaction. It is true that he also credits Lawino with a degree of jealousy, but the reader's response to that passage is one of mild amusement, and why? Because Bitek is using the stereotype of a jealous woman

being catty about her rival to make a condescending humorous description of the other woman.<sup>6</sup>

That this point of view would be considered controversial highlights the difficulty of a feminist literary approach, because in refusing to admire Lawino's romanticised version of her obviously sexist society one tears away the carpet from under the feet of the fighter against cultural imperialism. Lawino has become a holy cow, and slaughtering her and her various sisters is inevitably a betrayal, because they are inextricably bound up with the fight for African self-confidence in the face of Western cultural imperialism.

That this is a real problem is to some extent proved by the one writer, in fact the one novel which up until Buchi Emecheta's books has managed a clear repudiation of traditional society's treatment of women, namely Nurudin Farah's novel *From a Crooked Rib*.<sup>7</sup> Nurudin Farah's nomadic, cattle-raising, hierarchical and Muslim Somalis are far removed, both in space and tradition from the azephalous, crop-growing and settled traditional societies of the mainstream of modern African literature, and he is under no obligation to admire it; on the contrary, he finds its patriarchal power structure repugnant and sees its maltreatment of women as one of its most serious abuses. In other words, he is not faced with the problem I have just outlined, and his book seems a simple and natural act of reflection upon one's past, drawing attention to perceived flaws and implicitly suggesting remedies.

If the discussion of women's role in traditional societies is fraught with difficulties, the discussion of women's role in urban African society (both transitional and modern) is no simpler. There seems to be a general consensus among sociologists that the position of women deteriorated during the colonial period. This was mainly due to the large-scale movement from rural areas into the extended slums of the new colonial centres like Nairobi and Lagos. The traditional tribal extended family mode of production clashed with the competitive individualism of the capitalist mode of production, and initially this left no or very little room for women. They lost their vital economic role as food producers, and their strict adherence to ascribed roles in a family hierarchy (they could be wives, mothers, sisters or daughters) puts an attempt at individual achievement outside their scope. According to Kenneth Little, they had a choice of three basic possibilities: they could be wives, thus remaining completely within the traditional sphere; they could become petty traders and thereby regain some of their importance to the economy; or they could become prostitutes.<sup>8</sup> The last option was obviously disreputable, but it was the only opportunity for women to decide their own destiny

and improve their economic position as it was outside the jurisdiction of traditional society. The prostitutes in towns thus became not just social outcasts, but pioneers of a new and independent way of life for women, the founding mothers of many of the educated independent modern African women. There is linguistic evidence of this connection in many places, where the word denoting a prostitute is also used to denote an educated woman,<sup>9</sup> and it accounts for the extraordinarily large amount of attention given to the prostitute in modern African fiction.

It is inevitable that the prostitute should be scorned and condemned, both because of the source of her income and because of the threat she represents to the established sexual organization of the society. Among the early writers, Cyprian Ekwensi stands out as the one who presents the most dishonest and bigoted portrayal of women.<sup>10</sup> He combines an obvious sexual attraction to the prostitute with a heavy moral condemnation of her. This leads him to divide his female characters into the well-known categories of whores and madonnas. You sleep with the whores and then perhaps beat them up to teach them a lesson and make them change their wicked ways, and then you marry the somewhat boring, but pure madonna. The missionaries have not lived in vain! This reduction of women characters to aspects of male fantasy minimalizes their possibility for response and action. Their repertoire in moments of crises seems to be limited to three basic options: they can cry, cook a meal or offer sex. Ekwensi is not explicitly furthering an ideology; the purpose of his books lies, according to himself, in their entertainment value, and at times he comes close to writing a kind of closet pornography. In that particularly unfortunate combination of traditional African and British Victorian patriarchal attitudes Ekwensi represents the zenith. His books can serve as a good guideline to the extent and nature of cultural imperialism and African male chauvinism. The dilemma of 'what comes first' remains unsolved.

The question one asks is 'What are the possible ways out of this dilemma?' In the following section I shall outline some of the paths taken — or, in some cases, not taken — by African writers.

An all-encompassing ideology which could fit both women's emancipation and cultural liberation into the same pattern is an obvious answer, and for this one looks to the socialist writers, in particular Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya and A.K. Armah from Ghana. However, a comparison of the two authorships forces one into the somewhat surprising conclusion that the two writers would appear to differ rather radically in their opinions. Armah's socialism seems to lead to extreme misogyny, Ngugi's to a more positive attitude towards women. This

reflects rather badly on their ideology, but it can be partly — if not completely — explained away by the particular attitudes and interests of the two writers concerned. Both Armah's and Ngugi's writing can be divided roughly into two categories: (1) The exploration of the ills of their respective societies in the light of their ideology; (2) suggested solutions in the form of allegorical models.

In Armah's books belonging to the first category, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*,<sup>11</sup> the women appear as one of the main obstacles to progress. They cling tenaciously to traditional extended family patterns, particularly in the area of communal sharing of economic resources which, when transplanted into a capitalist economy, becomes plain greed. With Armah's women there would seem to be no holds barred in their quest for money: they take active part in corrupt business ventures, they use sex as a bargaining power, and they even cause the death of their babies in their seemingly endless quest for money. Their values and relationships are reified, and this, in a socialist analysis, is exactly what happens under capitalist market conditions. But Armah fails to analyse these conditions, he merely describes them, conveying his anger and disgust rather than providing the possible explanations which his ideology puts at his disposal.

The other side of his writing which concerns itself with the positive models is set in the distant past and describes optimal solutions or behaviour in the time of the slave trade or Ashante wars.<sup>12</sup> In this part he does portray strong and courageous women, but it is his failure to suggest either explanations for present-day patterns of behaviour or present-day models, which marks him as a misogynist. It would appear that he has to go back in history several centuries to feel comfortable about creating a positive female character. His portrayal of women is the most important aspect in which he differs most radically from Ngugi.

Ngugi's writing also falls into these two somewhat rough categories of explaining the ills of his society and suggesting remedies, but with some modifications: the pattern is not strictly chronological and the author himself develops and changes throughout the authorship. In his first three novels which are set in village surroundings during and just after the Kenyan fight for independence<sup>13</sup> the women have traditional roles as mothers, sisters, wives and lovers, and there is an emphasis on the nurturing, sustaining role of women. They also fail and betray, but as the novels are about failure and betrayal as such the women are not singled out as being particularly pernicious, but are described as an integral part of a neo-colonial situation which is painful and bewildering to the characters and the writer alike.



With *Petals of Blood*<sup>14</sup> Ngugi moves into an urban post-independent world and the prostitute makes her appearance. She retains the 'alluring' qualities of Ekwensi's prostitutes, but she also becomes the symbol of the victims of neo-colonial oppression. The ideological purpose of the book which is to expose the mechanisms of neo-colonialism in present-day Kenya determines the action and character of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*. In Frantz Fanon's scheme of things the lumpenproletariat, amongst them the prostitutes who live miserable and debased lives, wake up and find themselves possessed of strength, dedication and idealism in the cause of the struggle against the imperial power structure, and in Ngugi's version of Fanon's dream all this comes true. But in the end the revolt fails all the same, thwarted by forces beyond the control of the characters. Consequently Wanja is a debased bar prostitute, victim of colonialism, a magnificent mother-earth figure and carrier of revolution and finally again a disillusioned prostitute living according to the motto that if you can't beat them, join them. She finally reverses that image by a final act of murder which is the true eruption of the anger of the oppressed, tainted by motives of personal revenge. Ngugi has expressed an early admiration for Ekwensi,<sup>15</sup> and in the character of Wanja he has tried to combine Ekwensi's 'alluring' prostitutes with a genuine revolutionary purpose, and the result is an uneasy combination, a four-dimensional woman, attractive, admirable, rebellious, defiant, pitiable, disillusioned, exploitative, winner or loser, balancing precariously between allegory and realism. Ngugi solves these contradictions in the part of his authorship which suggests solutions. Allegory is the most direct way of conveying a message, and both in his plays<sup>16</sup> and in his most recent novel, *Devil on the Cross*,<sup>17</sup> he employs this device. The characters become one-dimensional and unequivocal carriers of the message. The writer's own views have crystallised. The doubts and failures of the characters in the early novels are gone, and at the end of *Devil on the Cross* Wariinga, the heroine, is a 'judo-kicking, gun-packed, self-employed mechanic'.<sup>18</sup> Ngugi explains his reasons for this change: 'Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong, determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being.'<sup>19</sup>

The most important and admirable part of Ngugi's increasingly radicalized view of the position of women is the fact that he links their sexual exploitation to their class or colonial exploitation. By doing this he bypasses the problem of 'first things first' by saying 'not one without the other'. This, then, could appear to be the ideal solution, but it has its problems and limitations. Even if one accepts the loss of artistic quality

for the purpose of carrying the message more clearly one finds that the allegorical mode quickly loses its power to influence because of its inevitable simplification and predictability. Another uneasy point is a feeling that Ngugi's car-mechanic heroine is a foreign graft onto Kenyan soil, an imported solution which strangely ignores what the Kenyan women themselves might think about the situation. This leads one to look for a female African writer who could explore the situation from within. The Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, is such a person.

The points of difficulty and conflict in a feminist approach to African writing which I have outlined above describe very narrowly the areas which Buchi Emecheta deals with in the part of her authorship which is not strictly autobiographical: the glorification of women's position in traditional society for not unworthy reasons, the insistence on the importance of ascribed sexual roles, particularly motherhood, the early loss of economic influence due to town migration, prostitution as a solution to it and its lingering identification with educated women. This choice of subject is not the outcome of ideological considerations, as my pattern would seem to indicate; it is rather the outcome of a sense of outrage, coupled with a large amount of personal courage. In *The Bride Price*<sup>19</sup> Buchi Emecheta describes the slow and seemingly inevitable destruction of a young girl by the forces of tradition. The atmosphere of inevitable doom in the book seems to me to be a deliberate mockery of the fate-ridden genre of the African novel, and as such it is a powerful tool in Buchi Emecheta's clearly ironic and at times sarcastic mode of writing. She solves the problem of betrayal, which she clearly has to face, partly through referring to autobiographical data which establishes her as a clear sufferer at the hands of traditional forces, thus legitimatizing her criticism of them, and partly simply by reversing the hierarchy of importance of her subject matter. Women's emancipation is to her 'the first thing'. Despite living in London she is more honest when she claims to be writing for her countrymen than the earlier writers. She addresses the perceived ills of her society and ignores the repercussions this approach might have in terms of creating an adverse image of Nigeria, be it traditional or modern. Nigerian women have finally been taken off the somewhat dubious pedestal of silent upholders of the wisdom of traditional ways.

Buchi Emecheta brings all these subjects together in what until now is her best and most forceful book, *The Joys of Motherhood*.<sup>20</sup> Set in Lagos in the period from before and till after World War I, it describes the arrival and subsequent fate of an Ibo village girl who is brought to Lagos as a bride to one of the men in the fast growing community of expatriate Ibo

wage earners. Nnu Ego's identification is totally with the traditional role as wife and mother of male children. However, economic conditions in the big city make this traditional aspiration impossible, and Nnu Ego is forced into petty trading as a means of survival. This proves to be a viable possibility, but economic change forced upon a group under the threat of starvation does not bring immediate social adjustment with it, so when Nnu Ego's son dies she is made to feel that this is caused by her having broken time-honoured rules. Caught between poverty and traditional demands she has no room for movement, she can only be in the wrong. Buchi Emecheta makes her heroine put up a hard and heroic fight against appalling social and economic odds, but the outcome is exceedingly depressing. Despite the fact that she gains her objective, which is to educate her sons and marry off her daughters so that their bride price can help towards the boys' school fees, she dies a lonely and disillusioned woman to be ironically vindicated by a magnificent burial which her 'been-to' son feels it is his filial duty to give.

The disillusionment of the plot whereby the main character remains true to her quest, goes through immense difficulties and finally reaches the objective only to be disappointed contains an obvious moral. Quests in literature are rarely fulfilled as they were intended from the outset, but in the course of trying to reach them other goals appear and new visions become possible. Not so with Nnu Ego. It is precisely her unswerving devotion to her goal of mother and wife that brings about her downfall. Not that there is anything wrong with those objectives, Buchi Emecheta does not maintain that, but she has herself made the move into the westernized world, in which achievement and through it a sense of personal satisfaction is a road which is also open to women, and she is stating her strong preference for it. She has a firm belief in the power of individual effort, and she advocates rebellion and flouting of traditional values as possible and at times commendable avenues of action. As a foil to her doggedly traditional heroine she outlines the life of a younger co-wife, Adaku, who was handed down to their shared husband on the death of his older brother. Her start in Lagos parallels Nnu Ego's. They both give birth to a son who dies in infancy, which plunges them into despair. This parallel obviously heightens the moral lesson. Adaku subsequently has two daughters, a further reason for despair, but she is rebellious and finally leaves the extended family to become a prostitute so that she can afford to educate her daughters, a thought that would never have occurred to Nnu Ego. The showdown between the two solutions to the women's problems is a lesson in what to do as well as a deliberate slaughtering of holy cows:

'I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life.... I am leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife.'

'To go and worship your *chi*?'

'My *chi* be damned. I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi*,' she added again fiercely.<sup>21</sup>

The message of this is obviously not 'get ye to a brothel', but rather 'do something, whatever is within your reach', and the prostitute in transitional urban society has been vindicated on grounds of initiative and courage.

The final problem of my outline, namely the identification of educated women with prostitution, forms the subject of Buchi Emecheta's next book, *A Double Yoke*.<sup>22</sup> The double yoke is not being black and a woman, but wanting to combine the roles of wife and educated working woman. The novel is a campus novel, set in Calabar where Buchi Emecheta spent a year as writer-in-residence and where she was obviously appalled by the attitude of both the male students and lecturers to the female students. Her heroine is put in the dilemma of prostituting herself to her supervisor and getting her degree, but earning the contempt of her boyfriend, or giving up her studies and becoming a wife. Predictably, in Buchi Emecheta's world, she opts for her education with many angry words about double morality and 'it takes two to make a prostitute'. However, in the end she may just win it all. The purpose of the book is quite clearly to tell Nigerian men a few home truths about their attitude to women and hopefully to change them.

Her writing has a vigorous moral purpose. A moral purpose and an ironic mode are not new in Nigerian literature, but the target group of Buchi Emecheta's irony and moralizing is the very group which has hitherto had a prerogative on moralizing. This makes her not an heir to an already established tradition, nor the follow-up of Flora Nwapa's books about the miserable lives of childless women, but the iconoclastic beginning of a new tradition.

It is no coincidence that this paper started as a discussion of images of women in literature written by men and ended by discussing a female writer and her portrayal of women's situation in present-day Africa. It is only just that women should have the last say in the discussion about their own situation, as, undoubtedly, we shall. This, however, is not meant to further the over-simplified view that a woman's view is always bound to be more valid than a man's in these discussions. The 'first things first' discussion as it appears in the writing of Ngugi and Buchi Emecheta is a good example of the complexity of this situation. Ngugi's ideological starting point seems to me ideal. 'No cultural liberation

without women's liberation.' This is — as I have tried to show — a more difficult and therefore more courageous path to take in the African situation than in the Western one, because it has to borrow some concepts — and a vocabulary — from a culture from which at the same time it is trying to disassociate itself and at the same time it has to modify its admiration for some aspects of a culture it is claiming validity for. Ngugi's limitations lie first in his lingering admiration for the Ekwensi-type woman and then, paradoxically, in the lack of flesh and blood of his allegorical women who are admirable concepts, but not convincing carriers of change. Buchi Emecheta, on the other hand, can recreate the situation and difficulties of women with authenticity and give a valuable insight into their thoughts and feelings. Her prime concern is not so much with cultural liberation, nor with social change. To her the object seems to be to give women access to power in the society as it exists, to beat men at their own game. She lays claim to no ideology, not even a feminist one. She simply ignores the African dilemma, whereas Ngugi shoulders it and tries to come to terms with it. This could look like the welcome beginning of 'schools' of writing, and to my mind nothing could be more fruitful than a vigorous debate in literature about the role and future of women, particularly if it can combine the respective commitment and insight of its founding parents.

## NOTES

1. Vera Steffan, *Shedding*.
2. Felix Mnthali, 'Letter to a Feminist Friend'. The poem will appear in a volume entitled *Beyond the Echoes*.
3. Leslie Molare Ogundipe, 'Women in Nigeria'.
4. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann, 1958).
5. Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (East African Publishing House, 1966).
6. Here, as in many other places in this essay, a comparison with Sembene Ousmane's authorship comes instantly to mind. The only reason this has not been done is that such a comparison constitutes another paper.
7. Nuruddin Farah, *From a Crooked Rib* (Heinemann, 1970).
8. Kenneth Little, *African Women in Towns* (CUP, 1973).
9. See, for example, J.S. La Fontaine, 'The Free Women of Kinshasa' in John Davis, ed., *Choice and Change* (University of London, 1974).
10. See, for example, *People of the City* (London, 1954), *Jagua Nana* (London, 1961), *Beautiful Feathers* (1963), and *Lokotown and Other Stories* (Lagos, 1965).
11. A.K. Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Heinemann, 1968); *Fragments* (Heinemann, 1969).
12. A.K. Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Heinemann, 1979); *The Healers* (Heinemann).

13. James Ngugi, *The River Between* (Heinemann, 1965); *Weep Not, Child* (Heinemann, 1964); *A Grain of Wheat* (Heinemann, 1967).
14. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (Heinemann, 1977).
15. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Making of a Rebel' in *Index of Censorship*, Vol. 9, No 3, June 1980.
16. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (Heinemann, 1976) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* (Heinemann, 1982).
17. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (Heinemann, 1982).
18. Izamide Hazely, 'Ngugi's Images of Women' in *West Africa*, 14 November 1983.
19. Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price* (Collins, 1978).
20. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Allison and Busby, 1979).
21. Op. cit., p. 168.
22. Buchi Emecheta, *A Double Yoke* (Ogwugwu Afor, 1982).

SARA CHETIN

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## Armah's Women

Despite the increasing interest in African women writers' concepts of femaleness, few critics have examined how male writers have portrayed females or have questioned what the implications of these portrayals suggest. It seems apparent that a large number of African women writers have been motivated to present a female perspective somewhat as a response to the various male writers' distortions concerning femaleness. Whether these distortions reflect a conscious attempt to uphold the traditional view of African women's subordinate status in society or whether they merely indicate a lack of awareness of the female point of view is irrelevant. What is crucial is that certain male writers' concepts of femaleness perpetuate specific stereotypes instead of opening the way for new values and new ways in which people can understand themselves — and each other.

Ayi Kwei Armah's second novel, *Fragments*,<sup>1</sup> raises some interesting ideas that few critics have appeared to acknowledge. It is a novel full of

various female characters whose significance cannot be divorced from understanding Armah's central intention. The four main female characters in *Fragments* are portrayed as having some kind of influence on the protagonist's destiny. Armah depicts the spiritually and morally barren environment of Bibani (the Akan word for this is everywhere) where Baako, the committed and alienated hero, falls victim to the destructive force of his powerlessness and despair. Unable to realize his own life-giving, creative potential, Baako descends into madness, a madness that reflects his dislocation at the hands of a powerful force which he appears to have no control over. Baako emerges a passive hero and, given the pessimistic tone on which the novel ends, it appears unlikely that Baako will ever recover. Baako's grandmother, his mother, his sister and his girlfriend are all attributed with a certain strength and they all appear to want to save Baako from his misery. But towards the end of the novel when Baako is trying to make some sense of the madness that is imprisoning him, he states: 'Women destroying, women saving' (p. 180). Is this Baako in one of his more paranoid moments, or is this Armah's way of shedding light on the implications of the type of strength he has attributed to his female characters? As well as being the healers, the potential savers, are the women also part of the destructive forces that seek to undermine the very essence of Baako's faltering psyche?

Armah's most sympathetic portrayal of a woman in *Fragments* lies in his characterisation of Naana, the blind, old grandmother, whose wisdom is contained in her desire to adhere to the traditional way of life and whose fear of the changing values depicts her supernatural strength to 'see things unseen'. Naana is not only the moral voice advocating a return to traditional values in the face of the 'silent danger' (p. 196) which threatens even her existence, but her 'opening' and 'closing' chapters structurally set the stage for the mythical action that informs the novel. Against the background of decay, disruption and fragmentation, Naana's narrative seeks to contain the natural cyclical rhythms of life's essence:

Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns around. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return. (p. 1)

On one level, the natural, rhythmic cycle remains intact as the novel closes with Naana's last, resigned words: 'I am here against the last of my veils. Take me. I am ready. You are the end. The beginning. You

who have no end. I am coming' (p. 201). But despite Naana representing the mouthpiece for the soul of her people, she has become a victim of the madness that threatened to cut 'into easy pieces eternity and the circle of the world' (p. 200). She sees things denied to others, but is afraid to speak:

The witches saw things denied to others; beyond that they talked of what it was they had seen, and were destroyed. It is a long time since I heard of any witch thrown out of her secrecy, but souls are broken all the same. If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence? (p. 2)

Afriad to use her visions, her potential strength to recreate herself, to have her soul 'find its home', Naana becomes passive, resigned, and her wisdom is essentially useless. Armah uses her to reinforce an image of the suffering, helpless woman who absorbs man's fears and serves as a receptacle to which he posits his hopes:

Afraid to raise more laughter against myself, I shook my head with the perfect understanding that was not in it. I have not understood the words at all, but the sounds, above all the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings, and the women's voices, many, many women's voices always there around him to catch his pain and make it into something almost sweet, that was all familiar to me somewhere. And also beneath it all the thing that went on always and would not let me escape, heavy like a sound of doom, and also I knew. (pp. 9-10)

It is Naana that Baako searches for in his desperate need for comfort; it is Naana who becomes trapped by Baako's impotent despair. Her 'witch-like' power is contained; she poses no threat to the evil changes occurring around her. Baako identifies with Naana because of her suffering and resignation, not because of her potential strength. She dies a disillusioned old woman, still trying to contain the madness around her. She achieves nothing; she fulfils the role befitting an old, helpless woman. Armah could not have chosen a better character to symbolize the collective unconscious of a destroyed, uprooted people whose fate lay in their blindness, whose inevitable doom is epitomized by their silent wisdom that remains engulfed by their decaying illusions. Victims of Time, they are betrayed by their own unrealized potential:

What a thing for you to laugh at, when we grow just tall enough and, still clutching the useless shreds of a world worn out, we peep behind the veil just passed and find in wonder a more fantastic world, making us fools in our own eyes to have believed that the old paltriness was all. But again we hold fast to the new shadows we find. We are fooled again, and once more taste the sharp unpleasantness of surprise, though we thought we had grown wise. (pp. 200-201)



Armah is not merely interested in showing how the political and economic exploitation by the invisible white Christian colonialists affects the lives and consciousness of a people, but he also wanted to depict the existential anguish which threatens to destroy man in his search for basic human values. Armah doesn't appear to condemn Baako for his passivity and 'spiritual dislocation' at the hands of a changed society where the old values are dying. Rather, Baako represents an eternal victim, frightened and unhappy, and Armah doesn't indicate that his conflicts will ever be resolved. In fact, Armah depicts Baako as a man trapped and powerless under the influence of greater forces that seek to manipulate his psyche and control his destiny. This becomes apparent from the folktale Baako tells Juana on the beach after hearing Akousa Russell's 'poetic' variation of the myth. Baako prefers the traditional, undistorted purity of the Mame Water and the Musician myth:

'The singer goes to the beach, playing his instrument. These days it's become a guitar. He's lonely, the singer, and he sings of that. So well a woman comes out of the sea, a very beautiful goddess, and they make love. She leaves him to go back to the sea, and they meet at long, fixed intervals. It takes courage. The goddess is powerful, and the musician is filled with so much love he can't bear the separation. But then it is the separation itself which makes him sing as he has never sung before. Now he knows all there is to know about loneliness, about love, and power, and the fear that one night he'll go to the sea and Mame Water, that's the woman's name, will not be coming anymore. The singer is great, but he's also afraid, and after those nights on the shore, when the woman goes, there's no unhappier man on earth.' (p. 120)

Baako, in an unconscious way, lives out and becomes trapped by the myth. The tale forewarns of the misery of his own dependence at the hands of the sea goddess whose strength — and inevitable destructive power — lay in her ability to control Baako. Juana represents the sea goddess and, despite her characterization as a sympathetic healer, Armah also depicts her as destructive due to the very impotence of her healing powers. The only critic who appears to have seen the significance of the myth is Gerald Moore, but he doesn't take the significance of the myth to its logical conclusion. He sees Juana, 'a goddess linked to the sea and the phases of the moon' as part of the imagery that represents 'the promise of regeneration from madness or death'.<sup>2</sup> But I question the optimistic tone which Moore seems to have attributed to Armah's conclusion. To me, Juana's symbolic sea and moon goddess significance doesn't evoke the 'promise of regeneration' but represents a death-like destructive force from which Baako is unable to escape. The ending is

pessimistic, nihilistic, and perhaps sheds light on Armah's distorted concept of female strength.

On one level, Juana is a very sympathetic character. The reader, like Baako, is drawn to her because of her sensitivity, her acute intelligence at understanding the society around her, and her commitment to healing, despite the enormity — and hopelessness — of the task. Armah portrays a woman who is not aware — like Naana — of her potential strength. It is interesting to note that Juana's name echoes Naana's. Both women, in one way, complement each other as they are both healers and are both helpless. But whereas Naana represents that traditional wisdom connected to warmth and light, Juana signifies a harbinger of danger because she symbolises another powerful cycle, female in nature, that threatens Naana's traditional 'sun' strength:

...I was sure that I was beginning even now to see the sun again. And then they came and broke my peace, saying I had been sitting out there in the cold for hours. Surprised and angry that they were moving me another time, I was sharpening words to tell them I had only come to take in this heat of the sun, till one of them, was it Efua? said in her gentle voice words that touched my soul with fear.

Night fell long ago, Naana. (p. 1)

Armah casts Juana in a spider-like role whose ability to cast 'black shadows and dark, orange light' (p. 141) renders Baako powerless due to her strength that follows the cycles of the moon. The mythical significance of the moon reveals itself at the structural level of the novel. The thirteen chapters could represent the lunar year; Baako and Juana make love in the Gyefo chapter (the Akan word for Full Moon).<sup>3</sup> This is when Baako's strength is at its fullest. When Juana leaves, he begins his descent into madness, represented by the Iwu chapter (the Akan word for Death). Like in the Mame Water and the Musician myth, Baako and Juana meet 'at long, fixed intervals' and her absence not only signifies his despair but also represents the continual dependence Baako has on Juana — a dependence which does not free him, but only imprisons him. Armah doesn't appear to imply that Juana's moon cycle power is complementary to the natural strength of the sun, so it doesn't seem likely that the moon cycles hold the potential for life-giving, regenerative possibilities.

Yet Juana is unaware of her power over Baako, which makes her an even more dangerous symbol. She appears as the caring healer but Armah depicts Baako as becoming self-destructively attracted to the alien, fearful, cold 'black shadows' that seek to control and manipulate him. It is ironic that Baako rejects Akousa Russell's version of the Mame

Water myth — a version that celebrates colonialism — while becoming dependent on his own Mame Water, Juana, herself a foreigner. Perhaps Armah consciously intended the double irony here as he creates a very ambivalent picture of Juana. He appears to have distorted the very essence of Juana's mythical power: Juana, the healer, the comforter is unable to heal, her alien will not realizing the force of its own potential. Armah has turned her powerlessness into a powerful, destructive weapon. When Juana first meets Baako she feels strange and is immediately drawn to him, although the 'uncomfortable pulse' throbbing through her body signifies something ominous: 'Indeterminate at first, the hum gradually approached understandable sound: a soft and steady vibration saying you you you you you you' (p. 100). Juana is attracted to Baako's 'unfixed, free-floating, potential' attitude, but is upset and disturbed by the unpleasant flavour, the 'dangerous freedom' involved with becoming close to him. But she acts on Baako's invitation and provides the physical temptation to which Baako succumbs. Juana herself is a victim, like Baako, but despite the fears that draw the two together and despite their inability to recapture their lost Garden of Eden, it is Juana's 'fallen state', her own hopelessness that threatens to annihilate Baako:

She searched in herself for something that might make sense, but there was nothing she could herself believe in, nothing that wouldn't just be the high flight of the individual alone, escaping the touch of life around him. That way she knew there was only annihilation. Yet here she knew terrible dangers had been lying in wait the other way — other kinds of annihilation. How could she find the thing to break down his despair when she had never conquered hers? There would be no meaning in offering him a chance to swing from present hopelessness to a different flavor of despair. (pp. 190-191)

These 'terrible dangers' are linked to Juana as the sea goddess. The reader first becomes aware of Juana's identification with the sea (the moon's cycles control the movements of the water) in the chapter following Naana's warnings of the impending doom she felt when she heard 'the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings...' (p. 9). Despite Juana's feelings of estrangement, defeat and futility, she recognizes her physical and spiritual 'need for flight' in order to escape from 'all the reminders of futility' (p. 12). She turns away from the closed, decaying symbols of civilization and heads toward the sea, being attracted by the power of her own speed. Not only do cars connote power and status in the novel, but the intensity of speed is a recurring image in *Fragments*, especially when Juana and Baako are together. Juana is always

driving, always in control. Passing the various symbols of society's decadence, 'Obra Ye Ko' (Life is War), SMOG (Save Me Oh God), etc., she approaches the sea whose sound 'came over with a complete quietness that filled the ear like something made entirely for it' (p. 15). Reminiscent of Eve's lost garden of Eden, she 'descends' to the sea and reflects on her 'restlessness whose pain never ended but got dissolved in the knowledge that the fugitive could never leave the causes of her pain behind' (p. 28). Even the name of the second chapter (Edin) where this action takes place sounds like the Biblical Eden where the Original Sin was committed, a sin that resounds in the collective unconscious of a fallen people. Juana's personal inner turbulence is caused by the moral decay around her, 'reminders of the impotence of victims and of the blindness of those who had risen to guide them' (p. 31). She absorbs the pain and suffering around her, conscious of the fact of people's 'useless lives ... doomed to an extinction started long ago' (p. 31).

On one level, Armah evokes the Eve archetype to illustrate Juana's destructive power. Was it not Eve, tempted by the serpent, who ate the forbidden fruit of the 'tree of knowledge' and tempted Adam to follow her example? Armah, like many writers, appears to have used this theme which essentially holds Eve (woman) responsible for Adam's (man's) fall from innocence. The seductive power of the female is a force not to be reckoned with. Juana's role as healer initially brought Baako to her, but he would never be able to escape the consequences of his actions. They make love in Juana's natural setting, the sea, and toward the end of the novel in the Obra chapter (the Akan word for Life), the 'Catholic pagan' Juana is left absorbing Baako's 'desperate intensity' against a background of Christian images, symbolising the 'impending disappointment' created by an alien religion. I feel that the significance of the Obra chapter is intended to be somewhat ironic given the imagery Armah is using. The promise of life is always there, but 'there was a desperation here so deep that it was beginning to be indistinguishable from hope' (p. 105). As Juana leaves the hospital, the desperation, 'the disturbing things' become transformed into hope: the unused room would bring Baako closer and would hopefully help the healing process. But throughout the novel, Armah uses rooms as a means of escape, not as a means of communication and growth. Characters are constantly disappearing into rooms, unable to confront the malaise which is disturbing them. Similarly, Juana preparing the unused room could signify Baako's escape — into Juana's control. And isn't his very dependence on the sea goddess one of the reasons for his misery? Being unable to live without her, Baako is unable to live within himself.

Juana's intention to heal becomes even more ambiguous at the end of the novel when she is encouraging Baako to take his pills — pills designed to narrow consciousness. (He had been given similar pills abroad 'to counteract the consciousness expansion effect' (p. 102).) Juana encourages the narrowing, the blinding of Baako's consciousness as opposed to finding a solution to reconcile the expanding, visionary insights he has. By losing his vision, he loses himself within Juana, the harbinger of evil, foreign technology.

Armah's concept that Juana, on a mythical level, could represent the destructive, powerful temptress as understood basically through the Eve archetype interestingly manifests itself in various forms throughout the novel. The sea symbolizes woman and man's rites of passage: «Here we're supposed to do it all when we're born, anyway. The first swim and the first fuck. There's a saying there's no way you can get out of your mother without» (p. 125). Skido, with whom Baako later identifies, dies in the sea. The fish are trapped in the 'bag net, vaginal and black' (p. 128). Juana prepares the 'unused room' (p. 194) for Baako, unaware that she will be trapping him. The song the child sings reflects the women's loss, a 'long lament for one more drowned fisherman' (p. 128). Juana and Baako make love in the sea where his movements 'often seem to escape his control' (p. 122). They watch helplessly as Skido drowns and, going 'toward the lights and the dark river' (p. 141), they try to recover his dead body, but Juana is unable to save:

She had to admit she was concerned with salvation still, though she permitted herself the veil of other names. Too much of her lay outside of herself, that was the trouble. Like some forest women whose gods were in the trees and hills and people around her, the meaning of her life remained in her defeated attempts to purify environment, right down to the final, futile decision to try to salvage discrete individuals in the general carnage. (p. 123)

Misguided by her alien illusions, Juana, the foreigner, cannot save Baako but can only give to Baako what she herself represents:

He moved deeper, searching her for more of her warmth, his head filling with a fear of nameless heavy things descending upon him, pushing him to seek comfort in her. He pulled her completely to himself. She was warm against him, but in a moment he became aware she too was shivering. They lay together, neither moving. (p. 143)

The novel ends with Naana's lament about the fragmented nature of the traditional cyclical order of things, and although her death will join her to her ancestors, Armah appears to hold no hope for Baako's salva-

tion. Baako is under the influence of the deathly moon goddess' cycle, a cycle that does not complement Naana's cycle, but symbolises things 'only broken and twisted against themselves' (p. 196). Salvation appears to be an illusion, a shadow which people grasp at due to their own fear, but a shadow which they are unable ever to capture due to their innocence at the hands of destiny: 'But again we hold fast to the new shadows we find. We are fooled again, and once more taste the sharp unpleasantness of surprise, though we thought we had grown wise' (p. 201).

The only character who appears to have grasped the impossibility of salvation is Ocran, Baako's old teacher. Ocran's lament corresponds to Naana's wisdom, but his wisdom has not rendered him powerless like Naana. Ocran survives, a cynical old man, condemned to loneliness. He advises Baako that the only way one can survive in this world is to be *alone*: 'Salvation is such an empty thing when you're alone,' Juana remarks, unable to heal. But Ocran gives the clue to what salvation is about — something Baako, and Juana, will never realize due to their dependence on each other: '«You don't find it in the marketplace. You have to be alone to find out what's in you. Afterwards...»' (p. 194). And Ocran also warns Baako that the people 'you have to be careful of are the impotent ones' (p. 193). Is this Armah's way of warning Baako not only about himself, but about Juana as well?

In one sense, Armah appears unable to see women as anything apart from healers — and destroyers. Despite his ambiguous characterization of Juana, his concept of the female's destructive strength becomes less subtle when viewed in terms of Baako's mother and sister. They are portrayed as manipulating parasites and are held responsible for the various tragedies which occur. Was Efua's symbolic meeting with Juana by the sea perhaps Armah's way of forewarning the readers of the destructive female power which would collectively contribute to Baako's disintegration? Despite Efua's good intentions toward her son, Armah depicts her as the misguided Mother who realized only when it was too late that she had placed 'a curse' on her son. She retreats into the self-sacrificial role of Motherhood whose good intentions did nothing but contribute to Baako's despair. Similarly, we are made to blame Efua and Araba for their greedy, materialistic values which provoked Araba's son's death. Like Baako, with whom the baby shared blood, innocent victims become sacrificed on the alter of materialism. And at one point Araba cunningly explains to Baako how she can manipulate her husband with her 'secret weapon', her sexual organs: 'The male falls in the female trap; the woman is always cleverer...' (p. 86). The woman as spider, the

'bag, vaginal nets' reappear... The misguided Mother? the scheming Wife? the wicked Temptress? If women can't be savers, then they must be destroyers...

Perhaps it has to be left up to the African women writers to create female characters with depth and insight. And although many male writers, including Soyinka, Achebe, Awoonor and Okigbo, have used the Mame Water myth, I doubt many female writers would find it appropriate. Most African women writers today are concerned with correcting the distortions created by male writers and freeing women from the stereotypes that have, for so long, imprisoned them in a limited universe that perpetuates their own negative self-conceptions.

#### NOTES

1. Aya Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (London: Heinemann, AWS 154, 1974). All page numbers refer to this edition.
2. Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1983), pp. 249-250.
3. Ibid. The meaning of the three Akan words used for chapter titles were found in the above text.

# History, Society and Heroism in the Nigerian War Novel

## THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT: HISTORY AND HEROISM IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL

A common denominator in the criticism of modern African literature would appear to be the recognition of the essentially historical orientation of the literature itself. This is in the sense that the vast majority of significant African writers are, in various ways and to varying degrees, preoccupied with a creative interrogation of the African experience, especially since the contact with the West. But critical discourse of African literature, if it is to acquire the identity of a rigorous discipline, must begin to address itself to the rather crucial relationship between the socio-historical determinants of the literature in question and the inner formal categories generated by those determinants. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to perceive and comment on Ngugi's commitment to a socialist reconstruction of modern Kenya in *Petals of Blood* or Achebe's concern with the morality of neo-colonial African politics in *A Man of the People* or even Armah's disturbingly stark depiction of contemporary Ghanaian reality in *The Beautiful Ones*. Germane as such observations may be, the revelations which they contain are becoming increasingly obvious as the world gets to know more about Africa. Consequently, critical discourse of modern African literature must delve deeper into the ontological configurations of the very literary works in order to decipher the truth value of the texts as systems of aesthetic signification of meanings that ultimately derive from history. This need becomes even more compelling in the realm of the African novel, for the novel in particular is generically amenable to historical conditioning.

For the historically conscious critic, to study the changing faces of the hero in the African novel both as a literary type and as a social institution is to begin to contemplate, in the context of cultural action, the dynamics of the human factor in the process of African history. The peculiarity of



the heroic figure in the African novel becomes clearer when contrasted with his Western counterpart. Much of Modernist European literature (especially the novel) adopts as its hero the perpetual seeker who never finds and whose problematic career finds resolution only in the evocation of further contradictions. Most amply illustrated in the works of Proust, Joyce and Kafka, the psycho-social condition of this type of hero is best described by what Lukacs, at his most idealistic, calls the 'transcendental homelessness' of modern Western man.<sup>1</sup> He is man without gods, aspiring neither to chivalry nor to nobility, for in his world these values neither make sense nor demand serious attention. In short, the hero of the Western novel, especially in the 20th Century, is a lumpen wanderer in search of meaning in a world in which the quest for meaning is no longer a worthwhile undertaking. The social and historical roots of this condition are to be located in the unbridled angst, ennui and general self-doubt attendant on two devastating world wars and the coming of age of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The situation has only been further complicated in recent times by advancements in technology and industry which have culminated in the present ethos in which robots and computer chips could well be said to have taken over from man those tasks that ordinarily enlist heroic intervention. This is not, however, to suggest that the heroic instinct or its recognition and appreciation have finally disappeared from the Western psyche; it is only a re-statement of the obvious fact that since the late 19th Century, there has occurred a fundamental and decisive alteration in the sociology of heroism in Western society at large, an alteration which is evident in the recreations of the hero in the literary form (the novel) closely linked with the leading members of that society (the bourgeoisie).<sup>3</sup>

The state of the heroic institution in modern African society and literature presents a contrasting picture. The reality of underdevelopment in Africa connotes that those historical challenges which necessitate the assertion of the heroic instinct are still abundant; not only is the conquest and control of nature through science and technology still waiting to be accomplished, but the persistence of imperialism, neo-colonialism and the proliferation of corrupt and oppressive governments in Africa are historical challenges requiring urgent heroic intervention.

Consequently, the hero in modern African literature, especially the novel, is a very historical and therefore *problematic* being.<sup>4</sup> This is in the sense that he ontologically embodies those socio-historical contradictions which condition the social world from which the novelist himself derives inspiration in the first place. This point becomes even more compelling

given the rather intimate link between African history and the development of the African novel, a link so close that one is tempted to see the majority of African novels as historical novels of a realistic nature in the sense in which Alan Swingewood understands it as being concerned with 'man ... firmly structured within a totality of political, economic and social forces'.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of this observation for the changing faces of the hero in the African novel are far reaching for critical theory. The critical intelligence is challenged to resolve the contradiction inherent in characters who have to strike authenticity as both fictional protagonists as well as embodiments of definite ideological standpoints vis-à-vis important historical questions. In effect, we are confronted with such questions as: are we to understand Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* as a classic instance of the Aristotelian monumentalised hero or as a fictionalization of the complexity of traditional Africa's response to the European incursion? Is Ngugi's Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* to be seen as just a classic instance of the psychologically divided character or as Ngugi's portrayal of the question of mistaken heroism in the Mau Mau struggle? Is Armah's Man in *The Beautiful Ones* to be seen merely as an existentialist everyman or as a concrete depiction of the plight of the individual Ghanaian moralist in the neo-colonial atmosphere of spiritual and moral decadence? Because each of these questions defies a unilineal answer, the career of the hero of the contemporary African novel is further problematised. As a result, the values which he represents and by which he can best be judged even as a literary category are ultimately matrixed in society and history.

We shall subsequently demonstrate this socio-historical determination of heroic value by examining the various faces of the hero in the Nigerian war novel. I need to point out that this essay is a fundamental reconsideration of the thesis of an earlier effort in which I tried, in rather idealist terms, to articulate the same problem in the context of the national question in contemporary Nigeria.<sup>6</sup>

## THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE NIGERIAN WAR NOVELIST

Solidly predicated on the acknowledged statistical dominance of Nigerian works in African literature, literary works based on the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) also constitute the largest body of works deriving from any

single historical experience in Africa to date. Throughout the decade of the 1970s, the Civil War provided the dominant socio-historical concern for most of Nigerian literature, a dominance which is only just being gradually replaced by depictions of the ethical and ideological dislocations of the period of oil boom. Within this impressive body of literature, the novel form, for certain geo-political reasons that I have highlighted elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> also occupies a dominant position. Accordingly, the various portraits of the hero in these novels derive ultimately from the position of writers in the structure of the Nigerian society up to the period of the war at least.

At this juncture, it is crucial to note that the Civil War witnessed the highest point in the involvement of the Nigerian writer in national politics to date. Having been nurtured in the colonial educational system as logical successors to the colonialists, such first generation Nigerian writers as Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo etc., felt naturally entitled to a leadership role in the post-colonial era. It was therefore with awe and frustration that they beheld the failings and massive betrayals of the hopes of independence by the politicians in the period immediately preceding the Civil War. Since the secession of Eastern Nigeria was predicated on the failures of the Nigerian federation, those of the writers who found themselves on the Biafran side felt naturally inclined to demonstrate, in practical terms, their commitment to a fundamental re-evaluation of the values which bedevilled the erstwhile Nigerian federation. In the heat of the conflict, Achebe had this to say:

Biafra stands in opposition to the murder and rape of Africa by whites and blacks alike because she has tasted both and found them equally bitter.... Biafran writers are committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence.<sup>8</sup>

It was this kind of conviction that drew men like Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi, Eddie Iroh, and Chukwuemeka Ike into the active service of the Biafran government in various capacities. It was for the same cause that Christopher Okigbo died in battle wearing the uniform of an army major. It is important to point out that the involvement of these writers was conducted in the context of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie (of which they formed an enlightened arm) in the life of the Nigerian state.

Accordingly, their literary undertakings in this period bear the stamp of their class perspective. This feature comes out most prominently in the novel form in which most of the protagonists could be said, at least on the

basis of professional ranking, to be transpositions of the world view and class role(s) of the bourgeoisie in the war milieu. For instance, Dr Kanu in Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is a medical doctor and a former university lecturer; Chumah in Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General* is an army colonel while the protagonists in Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun*, Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* and Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, respectively, are all members of a loosely defined bourgeoisie. In effect, the various novelists writing on the war are unconsciously mediating their own class roles in a specific episode of the national historical process and thereby lending credence, implicitly, to Lukacs' rather generalised observation that 'writers will tend to present an inside picture of the class on which their own experience of society is based. All other social classes will tend to be seen from the outside.'<sup>9</sup> This thesis finds further theoretical reinforcement in Goldmann's genetic structuralist conception of the relationship between literature and society: 'The ultimate source of a literary text ... is not the «I» of its author, but the «we» of the social class whose world vision it embodies.'<sup>10</sup>

But in being mediations of the world view of their creators, the heroes of the Nigerian war novel do not affirm the values of that world view but instead are cast in roles that are ultimately critical or even antagonistic to those values. The dominant temper of the novels in question is a certain critical realism which goes beyond the reflection of the empirical history of the war. Our specific theoretical caveat, which is further explored in the rest of this essay, is that the realism of the Nigerian war novel, like the 19th-Century European realism of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Turgenev and Dostoevsky, was inspired by the hegemonic ideology of the bourgeoisie but ended up being critical and even subversive of the position, interests and role(s) of that class.<sup>11</sup>

In pursuit of this position, we shall subsequently be concerned with an exploration of the extent to which the heroes of Ike's Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* are able to carry the twin burden of simultaneously embodying the class world view of their creators while striving to justify themselves ontologically as fictional characters. We shall be arguing that owing to the indissoluble relationship between their historical conditioning and their status as artistic creations, the success or failure of these heroes as characters is in itself an assessment of the role(s) of the bourgeoisie in the specific historical milieu in question.

## FACES OF THE HERO

In *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, Eddie Iroh depicts the heroic function as it was displayed by the military arm of the Nigerian élite. The general conceptual framework for this departure appears to be the prominent political role which the professional soldier came to play in Nigerian history from 1966 to the end of the Civil War in 1970 and even beyond. Iroh portrays his hero against this background and uses him to explore the crisis of confidence which bedevilled the leadership of the élite in general and the army in particular. Colonel Charles Chumah who is at the centre of the novel's universe is an idealist and a patriot, an ardent believer in the secessionist dream of a Biafran republic. His training in British military institutions and subsequent contact with European soldiers during the United Nations peace-keeping operations in the Congo equip him with an anti-imperialist consciousness. 'The Congo transformed Chumah.... He discovered a flair for military politics and the ideological nuances of military conflict.... Charles Chumah came out of the strife-torn republic with two passionate hates: white diplomats and white mercenaries.'<sup>12</sup>

In the immediate context of the Civil War, Chumah is confronted with the onerous task of demonstrating his patriotism against a cabal of white mercenaries into whose hands the General (and Biafran head of state) has literally transferred the responsibility of defending the fledgling republic. Events unfold quickly in this exciting war thriller and in the ensuing war of nerves between the General and Chumah, the mercenaries betray the security of the republic and it is left to the ingenuity of Chumah and his kind to save their land from the deadly blackmail of the mercenaries. This apparently straightforward plot holds immense possibilities for the relationship between the hero and his socio-historical determination.

Of paramount importance is the fact that Chumah's heroism cannot easily be divorced from his perception of the political significance of his actions. He sees his opposition to the mercenaries not only as a patriotic duty but also as a practical illustration of his anti-imperialist convictions: 'I'm not prepared to fight alongside mercenaries who are making money at the expense of the lives of the people who are contributing the money...'<sup>13</sup> But to oppose the mercenaries is to challenge the General himself. Consequently, Chumah is compelled to spend the rest of his career in the novel reconciling between the need to translate his patriotism into action against the Federals on the one hand and the necessity to have the right political and ideological atmosphere for the flowering of

patriotism. Clearly, these are the two battlefronts and two sets of 'enemies' against whom Chumah is pitted. It is this twin battle that constitutes the essence of his heroic challenge in the novel.

In order to adequately equip him to confront this challenge, Iroh imbues his hero with contradictory attributes. He is a rare combination of right-minded patriotism and professional brilliance on the one hand and ruthless villainy on the other. He requires the first set of attributes to carry the weight of his ideological and political convictions; but he equally needs to be a villain to vindicate himself in a war situation. It is these contradictory impulses that govern his *life* as a fictional character and also fashion his psychological portrait. Cast in this mould, Chumah approximates what the Nigerian playwright and poet, J.P. Clark, terms 'the hero as a villain'. He is both 'a man admired for achievements and noble qualities' as well as 'a person guilty or capable of great wickedness'. These contradictory impulses are, according to Clark, the necessary complementary ingredients for the heroic personage:

...the concept of the hero, who on the whole is a fighter of one kind or another, carries within it positive and negative elements. Where these are acknowledged and properly coupled, there will occur that right degree of charge which becomes a source of power both for the person and the people who call him hero.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, Colonel Chumah is portrayed as a historically conditioned delicate balance of the positive and negative poles of heroism. His emotional constitution is tailored to reflect this contradictory essence. He is described as a man of 'intense emotions who hated and loved ... with consummate passion'. Even his facial countenance and overall physique equally convey his essentially problematic nature and career: 'Aged thirty-five years, he was tall, trim and not exactly good-looking; rather pleasantly ugly. His upper lip was weighed down with a heavy patch of hair which tended to lend his face a permanently severe mien that did not improve his looks.'<sup>15</sup> These antithetical qualities find easy correlation in the fact that he loved his Biafran nation with zest and hated the white mercenaries exploiting Biafra with 'consummate passion'. At the level of practical action, his efforts bear the stamp of his essential contradiction. We are told that his brilliant defence of the capital city 'became an epic tale of *ruthless, magnificent heroism* and inimitable gallantry...' (my italics). Yet there is everything about his conduct of this battle that testifies to the streak of villainy in Chumah. When at the end of the battle his subordinates confront him with a group of prisoners-of-war, the choice is between sparing them in line with the convention of civilized warfare and

summarily executing them. His instinctive order to his men is quite revealing: 'Take all twenty of them behind the trenches. And shoot them!'

Additional insight is provided, at the level of form, into the peculiar slant of Chumah's heroic stature if we consider the generic imperatives of the type of novel in which he *exists*. *Forty-eight Guns for the General* belongs in the realm of the war thriller. There is clearly an attempt by Iroh to marry the necessity for an 'accurate' depiction of history with the need for entertainment in its 20th-Century Western urban pop culture sense. Accordingly, one of the minimum requirements of the thriller form is that the hero should be a kind of superman in order to be the master of a fictional world characterised by precision in the timing of events, hair-raising suspense, narrow escapes, close-knit intrigues, espionage and counter espionage. In this role, Chumah is equally adequately suited. He possesses an incredible capacity to be at the right places at the right time, to master intrigues and to use his superior intelligence to avert calamities in a decisive manner. For instance, the precision and dexterity with which he frees himself from detention just in time to frustrate the mercenaries' siege on Biafra's lone airport smacks of Hollywood. Yet it is to Iroh's artistic credit that the classic aesthetic response to the exploits of the Hollywood-type hero (that of intoxicated applause) is not allowed to drown a perception of the more crucial ideological and political questions raised in the novel as a piece of historical fiction.

In the final analysis, then, Colonel Chumah is the hero who by virtue of his professional calling and instincts enacts a villainous role out of historical compulsion. Yet the nobility of his intentions and the practical value of his ideals for the society that sees him as hero are not depreciated by his violent method of asserting his convictions. His heroic stature is enhanced at the individual level because his private convictions (anti-imperialism, patriotism, etc.) also coincide with what a war-time society would ordinarily constitute as positive values. Yet, it needs to be pointed out that the overall impact of Chumah's heroism is rather limited by the fact that he spends most of his career in the novel in intra-class squabbles with the General who is tacitly depicted as an unconscious pro-imperialist. Iroh, like I.N.C. Aniebo in *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, seems to be making the point that it was perhaps the intra-class squabbles rather than the force of arms that led to the demise of the Biafran republic. In artistically mediating this point, Iroh implicitly amplifies the contention of many a historian that the failure of Africa to date is largely a failure of élite leadership.<sup>16</sup>

In Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, we encounter another face of the bourgeois hero: this is the intellectual, the man of ideas. This facet of the question of heroism in the situation under consideration assumes added significance because it involves also a consideration of the position of the writer himself. The writer forms a vital sub-category of the intellectual arm of the bourgeoisie in most Third World nations. Against the background of the historically necessitated involvement of the writer in Nigerian politics already highlighted, Dr Kanu in *Sunset at Dawn* embodies the implications of the man of ideas turned soldier/politician in a war situation. His background as a university lecturer prior to the war coupled with his idealist cast of mind manifested in his propensity to rationalise everything in the realm of universals prepares him adequately for a heroic career. In concrete terms, his position as Biafra's imaginary Director of Mobilization affords him a unique opportunity to translate his ideals into practice.

Dr Kanu's specific challenge as a hero is twofold: it has to do first with the necessity to reconcile between his idealism and the practical exigencies of a war situation. Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, he is called upon to transcend the limitations in the world view of his class (self-aggrandisement, money, property, power tussle, rugged individualism, etc.) to make his actions have significance at the level of universal values, the realm of abstract patriotism, dedication, selfless sacrifice and self-denial in the interest of one's country and people.

As an idealist, Dr Kanu predicates his political convictions on abstractions, thereby enlarging the scope of the Biafran conflict into the realm of black nationalism and global anti-imperialism:

The imperialists never come out in their true colours... They don't want a black country that will stand firmly on its feet and talk to them on equal terms. They want us to cling perpetually to their apron strings, and if Biafra was allowed to survive, it would upset their apple cart.<sup>17</sup>

This level of idealism compels him to assume the role of a carrier of his people's cause. Consequently, Ike creates an organic link between the hero and his society to the extent that Dr Kanu becomes a personification of the ideals, promises as well as the inevitable contradictions of the Biafran experiment. This close identification between hero and society is so total that it resonates at the cosmic level. As Kanu's and Biafra's fortunes oscillate, so do the elemental forces of sun and rain wax and wane. And here lies the *tragic* essence, at the level of form, of *Sunset at Dawn*. There seems to be an attempt by Ike to elevate Dr Kanu into



something of a quasi-Aristotelian hero, a noble man who falls because of a certain conjuncture of personal, social and metaphysical inevitabilities. For Kanu, the personal failing (the flaw) is a certain unthinking, almost juvenile idealism and simple-mindedness which fails to see the futility of confronting the sophisticated military machine of the Federals with matchets or even bare hands: '...let those Nigerian *sho-sho* come with their armoured cars, shelling machines, and heavy artillery. With these matchets, and with God on our side...' <sup>18</sup> The social factor in his tragic heroic stature is to be located in the fact that his idealism has no place among his fellow members of the bourgeoisie. Each of Duke Bassey (the businessman), Ezenwa (the professor) and Akwaelumo (the bureaucrat) is too preoccupied with contemplating his 'personal loss' in the war to get involved in the process of general mobilization to which Dr Kanu is so committed. And of course the metaphysical repercussions of these actions are furnished by the *synthetic* aesthetic link which the novelist forges between human action and the world of the elements in the novel.

Cumulatively, these contradictions converge and further problematize Kanu's career as a hero. Each step he takes in pursuit of his ideals is an advancement in the direction of self-annihilation, for in the world of bourgeois individualism, trans-individual values and abstract ideals have no place except for the insane. His subsequent resolve to actualise his ideals physically in the battlefield is rendered with a faint undercurrent of satire which is directed both at him and the social class he represents. His subsequent death in battle is futile, for at the end of the war (and of the novel), Ike reminds us that the various surviving members of the bourgeoisie undergo 'instant moulting' as '[each] person sought his own hideout, to bury his discarded Biafran skin'. <sup>19</sup> Thus, what Kanu had rationalised and embraced as an epoch-making revolutionary challenge was after all only one scene in a giant drama of bourgeois political convulsions.

As I have insisted elsewhere, contrary to the charges of pro-Biafran partisanship constantly levelled against Ike in critical discussion on this novel, the main thrust of the critical realism of *Sunset at Dawn* consists in fact in Ike's indictment of the Nigerian bourgeois class, so intent on the pursuit of its narrow interests that it can afford to squander the lives of large sections of their illiterate fellow countrymen in a futile conflict. The hero of *Sunset at Dawn* is only a symbolic sacrifice to the god of bourgeois greed.

It is perhaps in Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* more than anywhere else in the Nigerian war novel that the bourgeois writer has the sincerity to come face to face with his sinister role(s) in national politics.

Because Munonye's work is essentially a novel of ideas, the heroic function is not *acted out* but is instead explored dialectically (through Socratic-type dialogue) between two principal characters who, by education and social status, fall within the broad framework of the bourgeoisie. Biere Ekonte and Roland Medo are friends and members of what may be regarded as the second generation of the Nigerian élite. Together, they constitute a composite hero, a divided personality, the contradictory faces of an embattled class.

At the onset of the political crisis and subsequent civil war, both men, as symbolic rebels against the values of their class, are engaged in an active interrogation of the role of their fellows in national politics from the pre-independence period to the present. Here, we are compelled to confine ourselves to their views on the major issues at stake in the war milieu in particular.

Because both men opt for dispassionate objectivity in their analyses of issues, class suicide is implicit in their disposition. While admitting their complicity in the events that led to the war by dint of their class alignment, they assert their relative innocence: 'We are better patriots than the men who live in government quarters rent free and all cost-paid, who currently parade their own nationalism in public cars, often charging the nation for the service of allowing their noble bodies to be conveyed from one spot to another.'<sup>20</sup> Their critical consciousness is so pervasive that it spares no arm of the bourgeoisie, not even the all-powerful military: 'The military has been compromised by its woeful failure to satisfy the expectations of the masses in most respects...'<sup>21</sup> In their bid to further transcend the values of their class, Biere and Roland uncover the central contradiction of the war, namely, the fact that it was the poor who sacrificed the most. 'It is most unfortunate that there has been no logic in all the killing we've been experiencing. It's mostly innocent ones who have been shot or nacked to death — people who had very little or no share of the so-called national cake.'<sup>22</sup> This realisation culminates in a conclusion which, to my mind, figuratively summarizes the issue of class suicide in this very theoretical novel: '...all those in our midst who led the country into the present troubles ... should be the ones dying on the battlefield.'<sup>23</sup>

The special appeal of Munonye's presentation of the question of heroism lies ultimately, I think, in the novelty and freshness of his artistic method. Essentially, this is a novel that probes, in rather critical terms, the consciousness of its informing social class and its characteristic world view. What we witness in the composite picture of the Biere-Ekonte personality is the fictionalization of a rebel ideology; the bourgeoisie against itself. The implicit contradiction reminds us of Balzac in relation

to his class. In Munonye's work, the artistic implications of the contradiction are quite far-reaching. Because of the immensity of the socio-political and ideological questions they are involved in rationalizing and analysing, the characters hardly find time to *act out* their convictions. Furthermore, it would appear that because Munonye is articulating a disgust with the central place so consistently occupied by the élite in post-independence Nigerian social reality, he is reluctant to consecrate either of his protagonists as a hero in the normal literary sense of the word. Consequently, it would appear that the characters exist mainly for the purpose of animating the fictional world of the novel with a consistent ethical mooring which constitutes the yardstick for measuring whatever little action they take.

The candidature of the twin protagonists for heroism opens up two attractive theoretical possibilities. Firstly, it could be argued that the characters derive a certain heroic stature from their courage to subject the values of their class to active interrogation. This argument could even be stretched to imply that Biere and Roland are two bourgeois characters questioning and repudiating bourgeois values through the novel which itself is a bourgeois form. On another level, it is quite tempting to see the characters' relative inactivity as manifestations of a certain impotence. In this direction, it could be argued that, overwhelmed by the extent of their class complicity in the ensuing turmoil, Roland and Biere degenerate into cynical talkatives and grubletonians, blaming both themselves and their kind for the tragedy. But Munonye steps in to absolve them of this charge by making them take part in relief work and public enlightenment during the war, roles in which their moral appeal and humanistic vision would not be tainted.

In the final analysis, it is in the active interrogation of the role of the bourgeoisie which the two characters symbolize that Munonye conveys his undisguised disgust with the quality of élite leadership at that specific moment in Nigerian history.

## CONCLUSION

Beyond the obviously narrow academic concern of considering the various objectifications of the hero as a literary type in the Nigerian war novel, the foregoing discussion has, I hope, highlighted some salient issues in the sociology of that phase of the Nigerian war novel, namely, the following:

- (a) The Nigerian war novel continues a tradition of critical realism which was inaugurated in the 1960s with the publication of works like *A Man of the People* and *The Interpreters*.
- (b) Although the heroes of these novels variously amount to fictional repudiations of a specific phase of bourgeois hegemony in Nigerian history, no consistent ideological standpoint emerges from the novels as the works of members of a social class. The coincidence in their stance — their common critical stance towards the bourgeoisie — arises from an objective reflection of a concrete historical experience, not from a commonly adopted literary or social programme.
- (c) What is being indicted through the various heroes is the *quality* of bourgeois leadership, not the *basis* of that hegemony.

The foregoing discussion modifies the classic axiom that literature reflects social reality in one significant sense: the relationship between literature and society is defined not by correspondence but by ambiguity, irony and dialectics.

#### NOTES

1. Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), pp. 66 ff.
2. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. IV (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 215-217.
3. For an elaboration of the close link between the bourgeoisie and the novel form, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) and Alan Swingewood, *The Novel and Revolution* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975).
4. The concept of the problematic hero in the sociology of the modern Western novel implies a certain amount of psychological disorientation arising from the larger alienation in an industrial capitalist society. I use the term in respect of the African novel to imply that the historical problems in the African world also problematize the career of the hero. Purpose defines his 'existence'. His problem is that of mastering his historical milieu.
5. Alan Swingewood, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
6. See 'Society and Heroism in Nigerian Civil War Literature', in press with *Okike*.
7. Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 17, No 1 (1983), pp. 85-99.
8. Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the Biafran Cause' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 83-84.
9. Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 94.

10. Lucien Goldmann, 'Dialectical Materialism and Literary History', *New Left Review* 92 (1975), pp. 36-37.
11. Alan Swingewood, op. cit., p. 57.
12. Eddie Iroh, *Forty-eight Guns for the General* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 8.
13. Ibid., p. 110.
14. J.P. Clark, 'The Hero as a Villain', Inaugural lecture, University of Lagos, 1978, p. 15.
15. *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, p. 8.
16. See Basil Davidson, *Which Way Africa?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 148.
17. Chukwuemeka Ike, *Sunset at Dawn* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1976), p. 192.
18. Ibid., p. 14.
19. Ibid., p. 246.
20. John Munonye, *A Wreath for the Maidens* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 90.
21. Ibid., p. 148.
22. Ibid., p. 157.
23. Ibid., p. 190.

# Njabulu Ndebele

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## INTERVIEW

Kirsten Holst Petersen interviewed Njabulu Ndebele at the African Writers' Conference in London in November, 1984.

*Could you say something about literary developments among black writers in South Africa today.*

I could make a beginning by saying that the history of black South African fiction is really the history of the short story. This was tied to the fact that most of the writing appeared in newspapers, literary journals or other kinds of magazines so the development of black South African fiction is part of the history of journalism. People have asked why the South Africans write short stories and not novels. I know that Mphahlele is

one of those who has said that it is because people do not have the leisure to write a novel and that their bitterness is so great sometimes that they want to get it out quickly, but I am not totally convinced by that argument. Those who have been writing in the indigenous languages have been writing novels from the beginning. Are we, then, to assume that they are less angry? I think that the crux of the matter has a lot to do with the sociology of the written word in South Africa. Publishers were available, and people were encouraged to write novels in the indigenous languages, but it is only recently that publishers have been willing to publish long works of fiction in English written by Africans. I am thinking of publishers like Donkers, Ravan Press, Jonathan Cape, and David Philip. The political and literary climate in South Africa at the moment is such that these publishing houses have a vested interest in encouraging the development of the novel. This, I think, is a much more plausible reason for the emergence of novels in English now.

This development means that writers are now becoming much more aware of the demands of the craft. The longer your story is, the more interested you are in it, and therefore the more concerned you become to maintain high levels of interest, high levels of tension in the plot, in the narrative. Otherwise you lose the reader, so you become more conscious of the need and means to play around with the fictional form in order to ensure your readers' interest. You become much more sensitive to the development of the plot, the characterization, the conflict in the story, etc. An example of this is *To Every Birth its Blood*, in which M.W. Serote plays around with the narrative point of view, and in Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirl-wind* you find an interest in plot. It is a kind of 'mission to kill' plot, and so this keeps the reader wanting to find out what happens at the end. Mbulelo Mzamane's *The Children of Soweto* represents an interesting experiment from the point of view of technique of fiction, although I don't think he succeeds entirely, but there is definitely a consciousness of form.

*Would you think that I was entirely wrong if I said that To Every Birth its Blood seems a longer rewrite of Alex la Guma's A Walk in the Night with regard to both style and theme?*

You are right that both novels are full of social detail, movements, sounds like dogs barking, feet hurrying, etc., but I think that the major difference would be that because Serote's book is longer, it obviously can say more, and it is also much more experimentally daring. I also think there is much more depth of character development in Serote's book.

*Do you see it as a problem that you are dogged by this overwhelming theme of apartheid?*

I think it dogs everybody, and everybody is trying to find a way of most effectively dealing with it, but for me the solution is by way of making a very clear distinction between the language of fiction and the language of political exposition, and it should be understood that the relationship between narrative and the real world is a metaphorical relationship. It is a relationship by analogy, not a one-to-one relationship. That means that the world of fiction is mediated by the complex resonances of language. The language of art is by definition a language that demands to be interpreted, it is supposed to induce contemplation and enjoyment.

*Would you say that your poets have been more successful in making this distinction between reportage and literature?*

I doubt it. I think that the poetry has shown a lot of raw anger. It is a poetry of protest. On the other hand, the fiction of protest has concentrated on the objective evidence of oppression, so in the one case the emphasis is inner, in the other it is external. The best writing, both of poetry and of fiction, is the writing in which the writer has depended on the rich expressions of the language of art to reach their audiences through the magic of connotations, metaphor, and irony.

*In your lecture at this conference you said that you saw a present movement away from the protest theme towards a theme of affirmation, even towards something as absurd in South Africa as a possible joy in life. Could you comment on that?*

Some people said after my lecture that there was a danger in my approach because it implies an acceptance of the situation. This is not at all true. What I was trying to say was that in any revolutionary situation sometimes people can understand grievance and the cause of it without actually doing anything about it. I agree with Lenin's analysis in an essay which is called 'The Revolutionary Situation' in which he says that sometimes people do not take advantage of a revolutionary situation, because people do not have the subjective readiness to actually do something about an objective wrong that they perceive. It seems to me that the new development in this literature is precisely creating and consolidating a subjective confidence which will enable people to have the will to go out with an inner commitment to smash the oppression that is keeping them down. So when I say that someone wakes up in the

morning and says 'I am ready for a new day', it is not an acceptance of oppression, but a recognition of inner resources which can allow him to be on top of the situation, and this I see as an inner triumph.

*Do you see this as a reaction against the by now only too well known image of the black South African as oppressed and a victim, an object of sympathy?*

I think that if there is one thing this literature can do, it is to get away — in a most welcome manner — from that image of a totally debased people whose only reason for existence is to receive the sympathy of the world. There is this total mental liberation that is taking place which, as I said, is perhaps not even conscious. It is a result of the black consciousness movement which, of course, in its theoretical aspect is a very conscious rejection. I think that most of the young writers are caught up in that process of re-evaluation.

In his lecture, when Njabulu Ndebele discussed the theme of affirmation, he referred in particular to Bheki Maseko and his story of 'Mamlambo', the snake no-one wanted. Bheki Maseko has kindly agreed to let us re-print his story.

Njabulu Ndebele's prize-winning collection of stories is reviewed in this issue of *Kunapipi*.

Editor



# Mamlambo

Mamlambo is a kind of snake that brings fortune to anyone who accommodates it. One's money or livestock multiplies incredibly.

This snake is available from traditional doctors who provide instructions regarding its exploitation. Certain necessities are to be sacrificed in order to maintain it. Sometimes you may have to sacrifice your own children, or go without a car or clothes. It all depends on the instructions of the doctor concerned.

The duties involved are so numerous that some people tend to forget some of them. A beast must be slaughtered from time to time, and failing to comply with the instructions results in disaster. It is said that this monster can kill an entire family always starting with the children and leaving its owner for last.

Getting rid of this fortune snake is not an easy task when one has had enough of luck and sacrificing. Some say a beast must be slaughtered, then the entire carcass must be enfolded with the skin and thrown away. This is done in the presence of an indigenous doctor who performs the necessary ritual to the end.

Someone will come along, pick up a shiny object, and Mamlambo is his. There are many things said about this monster.

Here is an account of how Sophie acquired Mamlambo and what happened to her.

Sophie Zikode was a young, pretty, ebony-faced woman with a plump and intact moderate body. Ever since she came to stay in the Golden City to work as a domestic servant, she never had a steady boyfriend. The only man who lasted longer than any other was Elias Malinga who was from Ermelo. He was the first man she met when she came to Johannesburg and he was the only man she truly loved.

She was so obsessed with love that she readily abandoned any possessions or habits that Elias disliked. In spite of the priority his children and wife in Ermelo enjoyed, she was still prepared to marry Elias Malinga without the slightest intention of disrupting his marriage during their love affair.

One day, after a quarrel, Elias went away and never came back again. She phoned his place of employment to be told by a friend of Elias that he (Elias) had had enough of her. She never heard from him ever again.

After Elias, Sophie never again had a steady boyfriend. They all deserted her after two or three months. But it no longer hurt. The only name that haunted her day and night was Elias.

Ever since Elias left her she had never loved anybody else. All she wanted now was a husband she could be loyal to. But she just could not find one. Then along came Jonas, a tall, well built Malawian who was much more considerate than any of the other men.

For the first time in her young life a thought came into her mind. She must consult a traditional doctor for help. She wanted to keep Jonas forever. She must see Baba Majola first thing in the morning.

The following morning Sophie visited Baba Majola who was a street cleaner. The old man listened sympathetically to her problem while he swept rubbish out of a gutter. He told her to return at four in the afternoon. Sophie was there on time.

Baba Majola gave her a smelly sticky stuff in a bottle. He told her to rub her whole body with it before the boyfriend came, and to put it under the pillow when they slept. The poor girl agreed amicably.

She did exactly as she had been told to do. She felt guilty as the atmosphere became tense in the little room.

They ate in silence as the clock on the small table ticked away, disturbing the deep silence. Jonas was not his usual self today. He was quiet in a strange manner.

They were sleeping for some minutes when Jonas felt something peculiar under the pillow. It felt cold and smooth.

'Sophie, Sophie,' he called, shaking her gently. 'What is this under the pillow?'

Sophie had felt the strange object soon after they had climbed into bed. But she had been scared to ask Jonas what it was.

'I don't know,' she replied pretending to be sleepy. 'Switch on the light, let's have a look.'

With a trembling hand Jonas fumbled for the switch. 'Gosh, what a big snake!'

Jonas was the first to jump out of bed. Sophie followed. They fiddled with the door until it was open and ran into the brightly lit street.

Semi-naked, they knocked at the servant's room of a house in the neighbourhood to wake up a friend of Sophie's. Sophie's friend was very stunned to find them in that manner.

Quickly they explained the situation and together they went back to

Sophie's room. Through the window they could see the snake, lying across the bed. Sophie was very scared, but Jonas, Christ! Jonas, he could hardly speak.

Realising that things were bad, Sophie decided to tell the whole truth. She told Jonas she did it 'because I wanted to keep you forever'. They decided to go to a traditional doctor who stayed a few streets away.

They knocked and after waiting awhile, the doctor answered. He opened the door but quickly closed it again. They heard him say: 'Wait outside there. I can sense something melancholy.'

They could hear the indigenous doctor saying something in a strange language, and the smell of burning muti came to them in full force.

He began to moan as if speaking to gods in a faraway land. He then opened the door and inquired what their problem was. Sophie retold her story.

'Oh, my girl. What you have in your room is Mamlambo,' he shuddered.

'What? Mamlambo!' cried Sophie. 'Oh God, what have I done to deserve such punishment? What big sin have I committed to be punished in this manner?' Tears streamed continuously down her cheeks.

'Crying won't solve the problem, my dear girl,' intervened the doctor in broken Zulu. 'The only solution is to get rid of the snake, and I need your co-operation to do that. I'll give you a suitcase to take to your room, and the snake...'

'What!' cried Sophie. 'Must I go back to that room again? Oh, no, not me, I'm sorry.'

'The choice is yours, my girl. You either keep it or get rid of it. The sooner the better because if you don't it will be with you wherever you go. It is your snake. The witchdoctor was tired of it so he transferred it to you. So you are duty bound to transfer it to someone else or keep it.'

'Transfer it to someone else! Oh no! Why don't we throw it into the river or somewhere,' Sophie grumbled.

'You can't. Either you transfer it, or you keep it. Do you want my help or what?' asked the doctor in a businesslike manner.

'Yes.' Sophie agreed in a tired voice, eyeing her friend, Sheila and the timid Jonas, with the 'I hate to do it' look.

The traditional doctor took a large suitcase from the top of the wardrobe, put some muti inside and burnt it. He moaned again as if speaking to gods they could not see. He chanted on in this manner for what seemed like ages.

'You'll take this suitcase to your room and put it next to your bed. The snake will roll itself into the suitcase.' He saw that Sophie was doubtful so

he added: 'It's your snake. It won't harm you.' He continued: 'You will then go to a busy place and give it to someone. That you will figure out for yourself.'

They all went back to Sophie's room. The big snake was still there. Having told herself that 'come what may', Sophie tip-toed into the room and put the suitcase next to the bed.

Slowly, as if it were smelling something, the snake lifted its head, slid into the suitcase and gathered itself into a neat coil.

Her mind was obsessed with Johannesburg station where she would give Mamlambo to someone for good. She walked quickly towards the taxi rank, impervious to the weight of the suitcase.

She did not want to do this to anyone but she had no option.

Remembering that taxis were scarce after eight, she quickened her pace. She saw a few police cars patrolling the area, probably because of the high rate of housebreaking in the area, she thought.

It was while she was daydreaming at the bus stop that she realised the car at the traffic lights was a patrol car headed in her direction. Should she drop the suitcase and run? But they had already seen her and she would not get far. How will she explain the whole thing to the police? Will they believe her story? The news will spread like wildfire that she's a witch? What would Elias think of her?

'What are you doing here at this time?' asked the passenger policeman.

'I'm waiting for a taxi, I'm going to the station,' answered Sophie, surprised that her voice was steady.

'We don't want to find you here when we come back,' commanded the policeman eyeing the suitcase. The car screeched away.

She was relieved when the taxi appeared. The driver loaded the suitcase in the boot asking what was so heavy. She simply told him it was groceries.

There were two other passengers in the taxi who both got off before the taxi reached the city.

'Are you going to the station?' inquired the driver inquisitively.

'No, I'm going to the bus terminus,' Sophie replied indifferently.

'I know you are going to the station and I'm taking you there,' insisted the man.

'You can't take me to the station,' said Sophie, indignant. 'I'm going to Main street next to the bus terminus.'

Ignoring her he drove straight to the station, smiling all the way. When they reached the station he got out of the car and took the suitcase from the boot.

Sophie paid him and gestured that she wanted her suitcase. But the man ignored her.

‘To which platform are you going? I want to take you there.’

‘I don’t want your help at all. Give me my suitcase and leave me alone,’ she urged, beginning to feel real hot under the collar.

‘Or are you going to the luggage office?’ mocked the man going towards the brightly lit office.

Sophie was undecided. Should she leave the suitcase with this man and vanish from the scene. Or should she just wait and see what happened? What was this man up to? Did he know what was in the suitcase or was he simply inquisitive? Even if she bolted he would find her easily. If only she had brought someone with her.

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by anger. Something told her to take her suitcase from the man by force. He had no business to interfere in her affairs. She went straight into the office, pulled the suitcase from between the man’s legs and stormed out.

Stiff-legged she walked towards the station platform feeling eyes following her. She zig-zagged through the crowds, deaf to the pandemonium of voices and music blaring from various radios. She hoped the taxi driver wasn’t following her but wouldn’t dare look back to see.

‘Hey you, girl! Where do you think you’re going?’ It was the voice of the taxi driver.

She stopped dead in her tracks without turning. She felt a lump in her throat and tears began to fall down her cheeks. She was really annoyed. Without thinking she turned and screamed at the man.

‘What do you want from me! What on earth do you want!’

With his worn out cap tipped to the right and his hands deep in his khaki dustcoat pocket, the smiling man was as cool as ever. This angered Sophie even more.

‘You are running away and you are trying to erase traces,’ challenged the taxi driver indifferently, fingering his cap time and again.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked a policeman who had been watching from a distance.

‘This man has been following me from the bus rank and is still following me. I don’t know what he wants from me,’ cried Sophie.

‘This woman is a liar. She boarded my taxi and she’s been nervous all the way from Kensington. I suspect she’s running away from something. She’s a crook,’ emphasised the taxi driver looking for approval at the crowd that had gathered around them.

‘You are a liar! I never boarded your taxi and I don’t know you. You

followed me when I left the bus rank.' Sophie wept, tears running freely down her cheeks.

'Let her open the suitcase let's see what's inside.' Sheepish Smile went for the suitcase.

'All right. All right.' The policeman intervened. 'Quiet everybody. I do the talking now. Young man,' he said, 'do you know this woman?'

'I picked her up at Kens...'

'I say do you know her?'

'Yes, she was in my taxi...'

'Listen young man,' said the policeman beginning to get angry. 'I'm asking you a straight forward question and I want a straight forward answer. I'm asking you for the last time now. I-say-do-you-know-this-woman?' He pointed emphatically at Sophie.

'No, I don't know her,' replied Sheepish Smile reluctantly, adjusting his cap once again.

'Did she offend you in any manner?'

'No,' he replied shamefaced.

'Off you go then. Before I arrest you for public disturbance,' barked the policeman pointing in the direction from which the man had come. Then he turned to Sophie.

'My child, go where you are going. This rascal has no business to interfere in your affairs.'

Relieved, she picked up her suitcase, thanked the policeman and walked towards platform fourteen as the policeman dispersed the people and told them to mind their own business.

Platform fourteen. The old lady grew impatient. What's holding him? she thought. She came bi-monthly for her pension pay and each time the taxi dropped them on the platform, her son would go to the shop to buy food for the train journey home. But today he was unusually long in coming back.

These were the thoughts going through her mind when a young, dark, pretty woman approached her.

'Greetings, gogo,' said the young woman, her cheeks producing dimples.

'Greetings, my child,' answered the old lady looking carefully at this young pretty woman who was a symbol of a respectable makoti.

'When is the train to Durban departing?' asked Sophie, consulting her watch.

'At ten o'clock.'

The conversation was very easy with the loquacious old lady. The cars and people on the platform increased.

‘Excuse me, gogo, can you look after my luggage while I go to the shop? I won’t be long.’

‘Okay, okay, my child,’ agreed the old lady pulling the suitcase nearer.

She quickly ascended the steps. By the time she reached the top she was panting. To her surprise and dismay, here was Elias shaking hands with another man. They chatted like old friends who hadn’t seen each other for a long time.

Sophie stood there confused. Fortunately Elias’ back was turned on her and the place was teeming with people. She quickly recovered and mingled with the crowd. Without looking back she zig-zagged through the crowded arcade.

She was relieved when she alighted from the bus in Kensington. She had nearly come face to face with Elias Malinga. Fortunately he was cheerfully obsessed with meeting his friend. She was scared all the way to the bus terminus, but more so for the taxi driver. Now something else bothered her. The old lady? Who was she? Sophie felt as if she knew, or had at least seen the woman somewhere. She searched into the past, but couldn’t locate it.

What will happen to the suitcase? Will the old lady take it?

And Elias? What was he doing there? She suddenly felt hatred for Elias. He had never pitied her, and it was worse when she phoned his place of employment to be a laughing stock to his friends. She became angry with herself to have allowed her life to be dominated by love that brought no peace or happiness, while Jonas was there giving all the love and kindness he possessed. For the first time she fell in love with Jonas. But will he still accept her? If only he could ask her to marry him. She would not do it for the sake of getting married. She would be marrying a man she truly loved.

Jonas and the Nyasa doctor were seated on the bed when Sophie came in. Sophie was surprised to see all Jonas’ belongings packed up.

‘Are you leaving me, Jonas?’ Sophie whispered in a shaky voice.

‘No, darling. My father wants me back in Malawi because he can no longer handle the farm by himself. And I would be very happy to take you along with me.’

‘But I don’t have a passport. How can I go to Malawi without one? And besides, my parents won’t know where I am.’

‘We are in fact not going today. We will negotiate with your parents

next Saturday,' said Jonas pointing at the doctor who sat quietly on the bed, nodding time and again.

It was a cool sunny Saturday when the doctor took Sophie and Jonas to Jan Smuts airport in his small car. Sophie was going to board a plane for the first time in her life. Jonas had made many trips to see his ailing father who wanted him to take over the farm. For a long time Jonas had ignored his father's pleas for him to take over the running of the farm. But now he had finally relented.

Through the car window Sophie watched the people moving leisurely in and out of shops. The trees lining Bezuidenhout Valley Avenue and the flowers in the Europeans' gardens looked beautiful and peaceful as they fluttered in the cool morning air. It was as if she was seeing this part of Johannesburg for the first time.

They couldn't identify baba Banda (the doctor) among the crowd that stood attentively on the balcony, as they stared through the plane window.

The flying machine took off and the crowd waved cheerfully. Sophie felt that it was taking her away from the monster that had terrified her a few days ago.

The buildings below became smaller as the aeroplane went higher, until the undersurface turned into a vast blue sky.

She wondered where in one of those houses, was Mamlambo. But could never guess that it had become the property of Elias. Yes, after Elias had chatted to his friend, he went back to his mother.

'Whose case is this, Mama?'

'A young girl's. She asked me to look after it for her until she returned. But I don't know what's happened to her.'

'Well, if she doesn't come back I'll take it.'



# Cherry Clayton

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## BOY AND AEROPLANE IN A LONDON PARK

We never had much luck with kites.  
Caught in balls of string  
or tugging briefly against  
the hand only to fall  
like dead birds and cling  
to earth  
their tendency to come to ground  
became a symbol of all  
we had sought in each other  
and never found.

Now we watch the child and plane.  
It circles and swoops over the heat  
of a London park the lovers  
on grass the sweet  
smell of an English spring.  
He follows and runs with it  
inclined to fling himself about  
in an earthbound echo  
of its heavenly loops.

And we watch him  
happy to see him and his plane  
that free.  
Seeing too —  
unable not to see —  
that with an equivalent skybound will  
I might free you  
and you me.

# Anita Desai

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Kirsten Holst Petersen interviewed Anita Desai in India in July, 1984.

*You have called In Custody a 'comedy'. That is not how it strikes me; perhaps you could explain what you mean by the term.*

When I said the book was a comedy, I didn't mean it was a comic book meant to cheer up the reader. There is an order of comedy that makes you laugh in order not to cry — like the man who has slipped on a banana peel, fallen into a ditch, and laughs so that you don't see him cry. His humiliation is great, but he may rise above it by seeming to laugh. It is also the laugh of the onlookers who laugh to see the man slip on the banana peel and fall into the ditch, because they are relieved that at least on this occasion it didn't happen to them. Charlie Chaplin's art was based on this kind of laughter. It is not meant to be jolly laughter, companionable laughter; it is bitter laughter, rueful laughter. That seems to me the best answer you can make to the world the way it is. I could have written the story as a tragedy but didn't think it right when there is tragedy of far greater, more intolerable proportions afoot in the world. Nor could I risk letting it slide into melodrama since that is what the characters so naturally invoke all the time.

*The book seems to me to present a very pessimistic, not to say depressing view of Indian society and life as a whole. Is your view really that bleak?*

You know, a book is made not only by the writer, but by its readers as well. The writer has his conception, but the reader gives it different interpretations, adding to or subtracting from that conception, and so the book leads a life beyond the one given it by the writer.

Reading a book is like travelling in a new country, and the reader-traveller may be well or poorly equipped. Just as a traveller visiting Kashmir or Tibet for the first time brings a certain amount of luggage — mental or emotional — with him, and finds that to him Kashmir or Tibet means history and legend, or geology and plants, or markets and

commerce, or magic, myth and mystery — so a reader brings to a book his personal luggage and interprets it according to his needs. Of course, beyond the reader-traveller's interpretation, the book also manages to remain itself and separate just as Kashmir and Tibet remain separate from the traveller-reader and his accounts.

So you look at my hero — and I don't use the word sarcastically — and think 'What a miserable worm'. You look at him with irritation or loathing. But it is possible another might see him with pity or sympathy or fellow feeling. I've presented him as he is — without sentimentalising him. Perhaps to you he is a failure, and his life a failure, but I don't see him as one. The world is what it is, life is what it is, man cannot help that — but instead of being a victim of it, he can become the master by mastering the philosophy of life. That is all the triumph possible to the little man on the bus during the rush hour, fighting to perch on the edge of his seat, wondering why it is all that he can have, and knowing he can have no more.

Beyond this character, there is the concept of the guru. Do you know that a guru means a gateway, a door? To my lecturer, the poet is that — a door to another land. The guru inhabits it by right, the lecturer hopes to pay it a visit. No matter what the guru's faults are, they have to be accepted. He may not be kind and benevolent; he can be harsh and demanding, and the disciple will have to accept that and suffer it as a discipline that will widen his experience and his perceptions and teach him what he must learn.

I haven't sentimentalised the characters, or their society, or the world. I have to pursue the truth, and sentimentality is a distortion of truth. Yes, this book does contain my view of humanity and society and the world, and what I have observed of it. That it is also my view of India, of Indian society and Indian life, is merely a coincidence — I live here, I am Indian, and naturally India is what I describe. I have often thought that in India one sees life as it is, without masks, costumes or cosmetics, stripped bare, in the raw. In the west, life is well cushioned, well masked and dressed and painted and made tolerable and comfortable. But underneath that, it is the same and we all share it.

*You show a special contempt for the Urdu poet and his poetry in your novel. Does that reflect a similar contempt for Urdu poetry in present-day Indian society?*

My knowledge of Urdu poetry is limited. It seems to me representative of a particular culture and period in Indian history of which I have witnessed only the decay. I think Urdu a ravishingly beautiful language

that has cast its magic upon its poets and holds them in a kind of bondage. They are lovers of it and slaves of it, and the poetry is chiefly, almost exclusively, romantic. But I don't read Urdu myself and know only what is translated.

*I think many Indian critics are going to see your book as too harsh a criticism of Indian society and therefore feel hostile towards it. What is your reaction to that?*

It would make me sad if that is what happened, but it wouldn't make me change a word.



Anita Desai.

## ‘Waiting for the Rescue’: a Discussion of Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*

That’s your hand sticking out of the rubble.  
I touch it, you’re still living;  
to have this happen I would give anything,  
to keep you alive with me despite the wreckage.

I hold this hand as if waiting for the rescue  
and that one action shines like pure luck.  
Because there’s nothing more I can do I do nothing.

(Margaret Atwood, ‘Last Poem’ in *True Stories*)

*Bodily Harm* is encompassed within the framework of a three-week journey on an excursion fare from Canada to St Antoine, a West Indian country dogged by poverty and political instability. The traveller, Rennie Wilford, a Canadian journalist who specializes in ‘lifestyles’, describing and sometimes even creating fashionable trends, has been commissioned at her own request, by a magazine she writes for, to do a travel piece on having fun in the sun. Her comfortable existence in Toronto has been shattered by the discovery she has cancer and the consequent removal of part of her left breast. Awareness of her own mortality is further intensified by evidence of a mysterious intruder in her apartment, who, before being frightened off by the police, leaves on her bed a sinister-looking coil of rope. Dogged by her sense of death and menace, Rennie decides to make her escape. ‘As for the apartment, she just shut the door with its shiny new lock and walked out, since out was where she needed to be.... Rennie’s lucky that she can manage these sidesteps, these small absences from real life; most people can’t.’<sup>1</sup> But this working holiday offers no escape and ends by exposing Rennie to greater danger than she had faced in Toronto. Fear of death by a disease like

cancer is weighed against those threats to life which result from human malice — poverty, malnutrition and political violence. Rennie's privileged status as an educated, prosperous member of bourgeois society is eventually challenged when she is forced to recognize that, as a woman, she is constantly at the mercy of a whole host of oppressors in any society. Her trip to St Antoine proves to be a journey of the imagination, a transforming process whereby she passes from winter cold to summer heat, from fear into acceptance and from non-involvement to a state of serious social and political commitment.

Rennie's previous experience of a third-world country has been a visit to Mexico with her former lover, Jake, but there she managed to remain detached from what she saw.

She loved Jake, she loved everything. She felt she was walking inside a charmed circle: nothing could touch her, nothing could touch them.... Rennie refused to feel guilty about anything, not even the beggars, the women wrapped in filthy *rebozos*, with the fallen-in cheeks of those who have lost teeth, suckling inert babies,... (p. 72)

Although she also attempts to distance herself from the suffering, poverty and cruelty surrounding her on St Antoine, the cancer, the rupture it has caused in her relationship with Jake, and the threat of personal violence posed by the man with the rope, have left her vulnerable and less well-armoured. Encounters with three different people draw her into the network of local politics against her will. The first is Dr Minnow, standing for election as leader of the party opposing the corrupt regime of the Prime Minister Ellis. Then there is the American Paul, who operates a drug-running business and whose lover Rennie briefly becomes. She also meets a fellow-Canadian, Lora Lucas, who assists Paul in his business and is in love with another opposition candidate known locally as the Prince of Peace. Lora and Paul inveigle Rennie across from St Antoine to the twin island of St Agathe during the election, in which Dr Minnow succeeds in winning enough votes to form a government in coalition with 'the local excuse for communists', the Prince of Peace and his campaign manager, Marsdon. Minnow, however, is murdered and Marsdon and the Prince start an abortive revolution. Paul gets Rennie safely back to St Antoine, but once there she is thrown into prison by Ellis's government 'on suspicion' and finds herself sharing a cell with Lora.

On her initial arrival in St Antoine, Rennie notices only surfaces and outward appearances about which she composes in her head trendy articles with slick captions. When Dr Minnow urges her to write about social and political conditions she protests she only does lifestyles.

'You know, what people wear, what they eat, where they go for their vacations, what they've got in their livingrooms, things like that,' says Rennie, as lightly as she can.

Dr Minnow considers this for a moment. Then he gives her an angelic smile. 'You might say that I also am concerned with lifestyles,' he says. 'It is our duty to be concerned with lifestyles. What the people eat, what they wear, this is what I want you to write about.' (p. 136)

During her stay in St Antoine 'what the people eat' becomes increasingly significant for Rennie. Dr Minnow refers sardonically to 'the sweet Canadians' whose altruism is undermined by naiveté, indifference or unwillingness to become too involved in local politics, so that food supplies donated by the Canadian government are regularly misappropriated, with tins of Maple Leaf premium ham, intended for homeless victims of a recent hurricane, served up at a public banquet for leading citizens. Rennie too is a sweet Canadian, imbued with a sense of humane values and completely ignorant of political reality. On learning about the high cost of sugar, the diet-conscious Rennie considers that's just as well because 'it's bad for you', only to be told 'that depends on what else you have to eat'. But in prison, it is junk food Rennie dreams about.

...not even real food, not spinach salads with bacon and mushrooms and a glass of dry white wine, but Colonel Sanders chicken, McDonald's hamburgers, doughnuts film with ersatz chocolate and shreds of stale coconut, thick nasty cups of ancient coffee, the dregs, her mouth's watering at the thought of it. (p. 280)

When she and Lora receive their first meal of cold rice and half-raw chicken, Rennie, as though in a restaurant, wants to send it back for further cooking, but Lora points out that it is better food than most ordinary people get to eat. Soon this meal becomes the high point of Rennie's day and when Lora's plateful is accidentally knocked over, the formerly fastidious Rennie picks up the chicken, wipes the dirt off it and puts it back on the plate: '«You should eat it,» she says. «We need to eat».'

Although the moral vision contained in *Bodily Harm* is undoubtedly secular, Atwood has chosen to present Rennie's development in knowledge and understanding within a context of religious reference, so that her journey takes her, not merely from the material comfort of industrialized society into the deprivations suffered in the third world, but from the old dispensation, where life is lived under the law, into a new dispensation where it is lived under grace, and the image of the journey is itself weighted with symbolic and religious significance. Rennie flies to St Antoine at night and is flying blind in that she left

Canada in such haste there was no time to inform herself about her destination, so that her journey becomes a variant of the night-sea crossing, in which the heroic quest is seen as a descent into the darkness of the nether world to rise again spiritually illumined, just as the sun was believed to travel through an underground abyss each night to a daily resurrection.<sup>2</sup> The ancient image of human life as a pilgrimage in which 'man as a stranger in the world of manifestation journeys back to his true home',<sup>3</sup> has also acquired a specifically Christian connotation.

Any pilgrimage during the Middle Ages ... was ideally a figure for the pilgrimage of the Christian soul through the world's wilderness toward the celestial Jerusalem. The pilgrimage of the soul was not in itself a journey from place to place, but an inner movement between the two cities so vividly described by St Augustine, one founded on charity, and the other on cupidity. Love moved the pilgrim's feet and determined the direction of his journey.<sup>4</sup>

Rennie, an unwitting pilgrim, identifies herself with the tourists she observes on the island: 'like her they can look all they want to, they're under no obligation to see, they can take pictures of anything they wish.' She considers herself set apart by her transient status, and believes that as a tourist she remains exempt, although this is far from the case. Tourists even suffer their own special sickness, *turistas* or Montezuma's Revenge, which Rennie herself contracts in prison, with a sense of gross injustice: 'she's not guilty, this is happening to her for no reason at all', and once political trouble erupts, a number of tourists, Rennie included, are held as hostage by the various factions in an attempt to put pressure on their respective governments. Just as the traveller lodging at an inn is a long-standing symbol for the transience of human life, so imprisonment has come to signify the idea of the soul trapped in the world of material existence. Even though she is journeying blind, Rennie has intimations of the significance of her status as traveller when she first contemplates her room in the appropriately named Sunset Hotel: 'Rennie feels momentarily that she may be spending the rest of her life in rooms like this. Not her own' (p. 47). Later, in prison, Rennie longs to be back in a hotel bedroom, no matter how tawdry: 'She'd give anything for a Holiday Inn. She longs for late-night television, she's had enough reality for the time being' (p. 269).

As a prisoner, she remembers an occasion when she was trapped all night by a blizzard in a bus station in Canada: 'the snack bar isn't open and the toilets don't work, there's a bad smell and no prospect of a bus out until dawn, maybe not even then.' Atwood, while relating the traditional image of human life as pilgrimage to the situation of the modern



tourist, also links those long-standing symbols of the temporary and restrictive nature of human life, hotel-room and prison cell, with the twentieth century phenomenon of the air-port or bus terminal, which she represents as an image of transience and transition through which one moves from past to present to future. On St Antoine, the air-terminal, donated by the Canadian government, is the point where Rennie steps out of her Canadian past into the uncertainties of a situation she is unable to predict or control. For a cancer sufferer, the word 'terminal' has especially sinister connotations. '*Remission* is the good word, *terminal* is the bad one. It makes Rennie think of bus stations: the end of the line' (p. 59). Mortal illness represents both journey's end and a prison sentence from which a remission may offer a limited hope of freedom. In contemplating her illness, Rennie has yet another vision of herself as traveller as she wonders whether she may eventually join the band of odd wanderers who search the world for cancer cures, eager to seize on any strange remedy, even faith healing: 'She doesn't want to be considered crazy but she doesn't want to be considered dead.' Only at the end of the novel does Rennie accept that the terminal can represent a beginning as well as an end: 'the terminal, the end of the line where you get off. Also where you can get on, to go somewhere else.'

Rennie's journey to St Antoine originates, not in Toronto but in Griswold, the small Ontario town where she grew up. As its name suggests, it is, in her mind at least, a grey and grisly place where life is lived in accordance with a narrow, joyless moral code. It has something in common with the '*selva oscura*', the dark wood where the speaker discovers himself at the opening of the *Divine Comedy*, although the name Griswold actually means 'gravelly, pebbly woodland'.<sup>5</sup> But Rennie thinks of it as an underground place: '...a subground, something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you'd want to go into' (p. 98). Griswold contains the possibility of moral vision, but it is blighted and loveless, just as the flower garden cherished by Rennie's grandmother as an image of heaven degenerates into a frostbitten ruin, Rennie later dreams of this garden.

...here it is back in place, everything is so bright, so full of juice, the red zinnias, the hollyhocks, the sunflowers, the poles with scarlet runner beans, the hummingbirds like vivid bees around them. It's winter though, there's snow on the ground, the sun is low in the sky; small icicles hang from the stems and the blossoms. Her grandmother is there, in a white cotton dress with small blue flowers on it, it's a summer dress, she doesn't seem to mind the cold, and Rennie knows this is because she is dead... (p. 115)

What should signify spiritual joy and fulfilment becomes transformed into an image of death. Life in Griswold is lived under the law, the old dispensation whereby humanity, judged for its sinfulness, has no hope of salvation. People there believe cancer is something you bring on yourself: 'In Griswold everyone gets what they deserve. In Griswold everyone deserves the worst.'

Although Rennie believes she has escaped Griswold by moving to Toronto, she is still living under the old dispensation. The city which offers a trendy world of fashion, smart friends and love affairs, is another Vanity Fair inhabited by Mr Worldly Wiseman and his associates, where the moral categories of good and evil that prevailed in Griswold have dwindled into canons of good and bad taste. Rennie's foxy, saturnine lover, Jake, is a Jew, and like Jacob, his old testament counterpart, a trickster. Just as the smooth Jacob falsely assumed a hairy surface to deceive his father Isaac into granting him the blessing due to his brother Esau, so Rennie's Jake is a designer of appearances and packaging: 'He decided how things would look and what contexts they would be placed in, which meant what people would feel about them.' Although Rennie herself becomes an expert on surfaces, cancer destroys her trust in appearances, and after her operation, she engages in an abortive love affair with her surgeon, Daniel, believing that, knowing what she is like inside, he must be able to accept her, only to find him devoid of self-knowledge and understanding. Daniel, whose family originated in Finland, one of the 'old' countries of Europe and who carries the name of another old testament character, meaning 'the Lord is Judge', also belongs to the old dispensation. His surgeon's knife is both the sword of justice and a phallic symbol associated with molestation and sexual violence. Rennie recoils from the idea of being buried piece by cancerous piece: 'it was too much like those women they were always finding strewn about ravines or scattered here and there in green garbage bags.' Daniel can recognize the corruption in Rennie's flesh and excise it, but he can offer no assurance of an ultimate cure. She must choose between sexual mutilation or death by cancer, so in Rennie's mind Daniel, as the man with the knife, is identified with 'the man with the rope', the bringer of death.

Throughout the novel the words 'malignancy' and 'malicious' denote evil, especially the cruelty and violence inflicted on the weak by the strong. When in prison Rennie assumes the tea she is given to drink has been salted accidentally until enlightened by Lora that it is done on purpose: '«Why would they do that?» says Rennie.... this seems gratuitous. Malicious. Lora shrugs. «Because they can,» she says.' In Toronto

the knowledge she has cancer, like a sudden conviction of sin, leaves Rennie feeling alienated and less than human. Even in hospital she is convinced of a faint odour of decay seeping through the bandages of her wound, and her sense of 'rotting away from the inside' is expressed in dreams of white maggots infesting her body. When in St Antoine she discovers a venomous-looking centipede crawling in the wash-hand basin, it inspires in her mind an image which could have come from a painting of Hell by Hieronymus Bosch. 'The creature looks far too much like the kind of thing she's been having bad dreams about, the scar on her breast splits open like a diseased fruit and something like this crawls out' (p. 60). On her return to the bathroom the centipede has vanished, but like the cancer, she cannot really be sure it has gone for good. Similarly, the man who, in what appears an act of wanton malignancy, left a coil of rope on her bed in Toronto, represents an ever-recurring threat of danger and possibly a sense of guilt, since the police summoned to the apartment assume Rennie is in some way to blame for his entry. She associates him with her fear of death, regarding him as an ambassador from a place she would rather not know about, and his rope as 'someone's twisted idea of love'. The rope reaching down into darkness symbolises bondage and entanglement, but, like an umbilical cord, it also seems to be drawing Rennie toward some kind of new awareness.

It is in St Antoine that Rennie, whose complete name, Renata, means 'born again', takes hold on her life under the new dispensation and eventually recognizes that she is living under grace. The two islands which comprise the country are named after Christian saints, St Anthony and St Agatha. St Anthony Abbot, the Egyptian saint who distributed his worldly goods among the poor to live in the desert as a hermit, spending his time in prayer and meditation, was still obliged to wrestle with the temptations of the flesh, generally portrayed in medieval and renaissance painting as female demons. For all its tropical lushness, St Antoine is equated with a desert retreat where Rennie hopes to escape the sexual menace and anxiety which haunt her in Toronto, only to find herself more troubled by them than ever. Even the jungle, full of 'obese plants with rubbery ear-shaped leaves and fruit like warts, like glands' where the ground is pitted with the large holes of landcrabs, evokes suggestions of both sensuality and disease. St Agatha, patron saint of the other island, was a virgin martyr who had her breasts cut off with shears because she refused to accept the advances of Quintanus, consul of Sicily, and renounce her faith. The people of St Agathe campaign for Dr Minnow under the slogan 'The Fish Lives', and the fish symbolism indicates that Atwood may expect us to regard him as something of a

Christ figure, and his death as a form of martyrdom, even though she undercuts the symbolism by associating him with a very small fish, despite the T-shirts bearing the design of a whale worn by his followers. He may be the only hope for honest, stable government on the islands, but his chances of success are, as he himself knows, infinitesimal. '...it is my own belief that the British parliamentary system will no longer work in this place. It works in Britain only because they have a tradition, there are still things that are inconceivable. Here nothing is inconceivable' (p. 133). But, as Christ called His disciples to leave their accustomed occupations and follow Him, so Dr Minnow dismays Rennie by calling on her to write about political corruption in St Antoine and particularly to expose the misappropriation of Canadian foreign aid.

Paul, who has an even more decisive influence on Rennie's life than Dr Minnow, is a far less admirable character, a drug-runner possibly working for the CIA who refuses to form close human ties. Unlike Jake, who tries to make her over into something else, or Daniel, who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is. Because he himself lives constantly with danger and the threat of death, he can look at the mark of death on her body without flinching. 'He notes the scar, the missing piece, the place where death kissed her lightly, a preliminary kiss. He doesn't look away or down, he's seen people a lot deader than her' (p. 204). This enables Rennie to accept both her own body, damaged though it is, and her own mortality.

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could? This much will have to do, this much is enough. She's open now, she's been opened, she's being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body's desperation, a flareup, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness and death; but meanwhile she's solid after all, she's still here on the earth, she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched. (p. 204)

Paul, who comes from Iowa, belongs to the New World, not the old, and the saint's name Atwood has given him probably alludes to St Paul the Hermit, who spent many years in the desert with St Anthony Abbot, and possibly to St Paul the Apostle who, after a spectacular conversion, became a great missionary and teacher. Paul is continually trying to instruct Rennie in the political realities of life on St Antoine, though unlike Dr Minnow he does not expect her to do anything with her newfound knowledge. Paul's chief virtue is his total lack of illusions. Having served in Vietnam, he recognizes that the cosy bourgeois life he led in the States was a mockery of what the world is really like: 'when

you've been living that way, day by day, never knowing when someone's going to blow you in little pieces, that other kind of life seems fake, you can't believe in it.' His awareness of the suffering and wretchedness in the world has caused Paul to question social institutions and beliefs. For him the world consists of two groups of people, those with power and those without, even if, on rare occasions, the two groups do change places.

Through her association with Paul, Rennie learns to accept the touch of death on her body and her own powerlessness in the face of nature. But a still harsher lesson awaits her as she begins to realise her vulnerability within the framework of society. As epigraph to her novel, Atwood quotes from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*: 'A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence ... defines what can and cannot be done to her.' On her arrival in St Antoine, Rennie notices two teenage girls wearing T-shirts with mottoes: 'TRY A VIRGIN (ISLAND), PROPERTY OF ST MARTIN'S COUNTY JAIL'. The female body is captive territory, and in prison she is forced to recognize how much she shares in common with Lora whom she has previously regarded with distaste and mild contempt. By Griswold standards Lora is flashy and cheap, and by Toronto standards, tedious and tasteless. But like Paul, Lora contemplates life without illusions, acknowledging its injustice with grimly humorous resignation: 'The worst times in my life I had choices all right. Shit or shit.' In prison the two women swap stories about their past lives. Rennie is the child of a weak, irresponsible father who abandoned his family for a mistress in Toronto, leaving his daughter to grow up in a joyless, repressed female environment under the far-reaching shadow cast by her grandfather, a doctor who had driven 'a cutter and team through blizzards to tear babies out through holes he cut in women's stomachs'; a violent man who threatened to horsewhip his daughters for behaviour he deemed insufficiently decent. Lora, terrorised by a vicious stepfather, is the product of an impoverished, less respectable childhood which has made her sharply aware of the realities of male brutality and power: 'He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him.' Her mother is so emotionally dependent on her husband she refuses to take Lora's part even when he threatens his stepdaughter with sexual assault.

Despite her apparent liberalism and sophistication, Rennie is much more confused about the nature of male power than Lora. Before her operation she had been writing a magazine article called 'Chain-Reaction' promoting a trend in drain-chain jewellery which, with its

notions of bondage and being chained to domesticity, implicitly endorses female servitude: 'You could get it for pennies at your local Woolworths ... make the chains as long as you like ... wear them on any part of your anatomy: wrists, neck, waist, even ankles if you wanted the slave-girl effect.' Her relationship with Jake verges, however playfully, on the sado-masochistic. He pretends in jest to be a crazy man who sends obscene letters to unknown women or jumps out on them from dark doorways, and he asserts that all women should be locked in cages. 'Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn't move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing' (p. 207). Rennie gradually realises that Jake is trying to package her, urging that she wear nothing but white linen jump suits, and furnishing her apartment in accord with his own sexual fantasies. As frontispiece to her volume of poems *Power Politics* (1971), Margaret Atwood devised a design of a man totally encased in armour, his visor obscuring his face, with his right arm extended, and hanging from it, with her left ankle bound by rope to his wrist, is a woman in the pose of the hanged man in the Tarot cards, her body swathed in bandages one of which has worked loose to mingle with her hair trailing on the ground, so that each figure balances the other in reverse.<sup>6</sup> The man's armour imprisons him, concealing his individuality and rendering him rigid and impenetrable, while the bandages clinging to the soft contours of the woman's body resemble the dressings on a wound or the grave-clothes wrapped round an Egyptian mummy, as well as evoking ideas of confinement and restraint, further emphasized by the woman's hands being tied behind her back. The poem relating most directly to this drawing presents the picture of a couple locked within an oppressive power structure which isolates each from the other.

My beautiful wooden leader  
With your heartfelt of medals  
made of wood, fixing it  
each time so you almost win,

you long to be bandaged  
before you have been cut.  
My love for you is the love  
of one statue for another: tensed

and static. General, you enlist  
my body in your heroic  
struggle to become real:  
though you promise bronze rescues

you hold me by the left ankle  
so that my head brushes the ground,  
my eyes are blinded,  
my hair fills with white ribbons....<sup>7</sup>

This image is echoed in a variety of ways throughout *Bodily Harm* where it signifies a woman's relationship not only to one individual man, but to the hierarchical power structures of society. The coil of rope left on Rennie's bed in Toronto is a sign that she has long been confined, fettered and placed at risk by her situation as a woman, and the gallows standing so prominently in the prison yard is yet a further reminder of this. The man with a rope supersedes Jake in her life and is linked with a series of uniformed men reminiscent of the man in armour in *Power Politics* — the two policemen summoned to deal with the intruder in Toronto, and the two others in St Antoine who twice solicit money for the Police Benefit Dance and who may be identical with the prison guards Rennie and Lora have to deal with. Throughout the novel Rennie is haunted by the idea of a faceless aggressor. In St Antoine she notices a number of men, including the Minister of Justice, masked by their mirror sunglasses, and on one occasion even Paul puts on a pair. The men's magazine which commissions Rennie to write about St Antoine is called *Visor*. When men obscure their individuality behind a mask of anonymous authority and power, women are stripped of their identity and reduced to so much raw material. In Toronto Rennie had done research, at her editor's request, for an article on pornography, going to see a collection of seized pornographic objects held by the Metropolitan police. She watches a number of films of women copulating with animals or being sexually mutilated by men wearing Nazi uniforms: 'but Rennie felt it couldn't be real, it was all done with ketchup.' Her detachment, however, is completely shattered by a film clip showing a black woman's pelvis and the tops of her thighs: 'The legs were slightly apart; the usual hair, the usual swollen pinkish purple showed between them; nothing was moving. Then something small and grey and wet appeared, poking out from between the legs. It was the head of a rat' (p. 210). Like Rennie's fantasies of a monstrous insect emerging from her scarred breast, this is a powerful emblem of mortality, but, as an image deliberately contrived by a film-maker for sexual titillation, it also indicates the utter depths of human depravity and cruelty.

Although Lora and Rennie in their prison cells symbolise how women in all walks of life are restricted and oppressed by male power and authority, the ultimate victim in the novel is an islander, a deaf and dumb man who represents the vast mass of people in the world crippled by poverty

whom ignorance and political tyranny have deprived of the capacity to proclaim the suffering and injustice of their plight. Rennie encounters him several times. Initially he frightens her by running after her to shake her hand, a gesture he believes will bring her luck, and later she sees him in the street being beaten by the police. When a noise in the prison yard prompts her to climb up and look out of the cell window, she sees the male prisoners who had been involved in the rebellion having their hair cut off with bayonets. One policeman is careless, a prisoner, severely gashed, starts screaming, and Rennie recognizes him as the deaf and dumb man 'who has a voice but no words'. For her it is a moment of profound and terrifying revelation.

It's indecent, it's not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven't thought of it yet, they're still amateurs. She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will ever get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is ever exempt from anything. (p. 290)

Detachment, neutrality, non-involvement are no longer possible after this: such knowledge compels action. In recognizing the face of oppression, Rennie simultaneously realizes she herself is among the oppressed. They cease to be objects of fear and aversion and become people she herself must relate to.

When Lora, who has traded with the prison guards for news about her lover, Prince, using the only currency available, her body, discovers she has been tricked into believing him still alive when in fact he has been shot, turns on them, they attack her viciously, trampling and kicking her unconscious. Rennie watches, too terrified to protest, but when the guards leave she pulls the inert body to the driest corner of the cell, sits down and, taking Lora's head in her lap, gazes at the face, battered out of all recognition: 'Rennie wants to throw up, it's no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there's nothing she can do, it's the face of a stranger, someone without a name.' She then looks for something to wipe away the blood, but there is no clean piece of cloth in the cell. The only thing to do is to lick Lora's face clean with her tongue. Atwood leaves it unclear whether Rennie performs this action or merely contemplates it: 'she can't do it, it will have to do, it's the face of Lora after all, there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name' (p. 299). Taking hold of Lora's hand, Rennie, through an act of willpower, seems to pull her back to life: 'there's an invisible hole in the



air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through.' The lucky, restorative or healing handclasp is a recurring motif in the novel, symbolizing human beings reaching out to one another in mingled hope and desperation.

The gesture of human contact and compassion by which Rennie seeks to save Lora's life is an assurance of her own salvation. 'She can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that's gone out. It will always be there now' (p. 300). She is also committed now to writing about what she has seen on St Antoine: 'She will pick her time; then she will report.' Atwood's vision of the new dispensation, life lived under grace, is significantly different from that of orthodox Christianity. Rennie, noticing a pair of scissors lying on Dr Minnow's coffin, is uncertain whether they are there by accident or design. Scissors, an emblem of St Agatha,<sup>8</sup> are perhaps a sign that Dr Minnow has died a political martyr, but they may just as easily represent the blind workings of fate, the abhorred shears' which slit the thin-spun thread of human life. *Bodily Harm* portrays the world not as under the guardianship of a benevolent deity, but as a place where human beings are at the mercy of nature — the hurricane which has devastated St Antoine, the cancer which corrupts Rennie's flesh — compounded by terrible acts of human cruelty and oppression. To be spared the worst horrors of human existence is a stroke of luck. But luck is a blessing only if one has the capacity to feel lucky, and this Rennie initially lacks: 'She's lucky. Why then doesn't she feel lucky.' Her experiences on St Antoine change this, so that by the end of the novel she is totally convinced of her own good fortune: '...suddenly, finally, she's overflowing with luck, it's this luck holding her up.' For Atwood, luck is the equivalent of divine grace, a totally undeserved blessing which the recipient can in no way earn or command. But to recognize that the blessings of one's own existence are a matter of luck is to acknowledge the arbitrariness and precariousness of human life. It also means one must regard with compassion the existence of others who through no fault of their own are unlucky.

But although the novel appears to end on a note of hope, with Lora still alive and Rennie safely on her way back to Canada, these outcomes are represented as tentative and uncertain. Atwood's narrative techniques give an effect of circularity as she demonstrates how Rennie's life in Canada interpenetrates with her experiences on St Antoine. The novel opens with Rennie's first-person narrative, 'This is how I got here'. 'Here' is probably the prison cell where she and Lora exchange accounts of their past lives extending right back to their Canadian childhoods, but

these sections of first-person, past-tense narrative are incorporated into the text well before the prison episode. The bulk of the novel is written in the third person though from Rennie's point of view, with the Canadian episodes recounted in the past tense and those set on St Antoine described in the present. Past actions and events are immutable, so the narrative presents them with a greater air of authority, while events in the present are fluid, less readily definable, and the future is merely a maze of possibilities. Rennie, for example, is haunted by speculation about whether the cancer is still active in her body. 'She thinks of the cells, whispering, dividing in darkness, replacing each other one at a time; and of the other cells, the evil ones which may or may not be there, working away in her with furious energy, like yeast' (p. 100). Rennie's release from prison, which is recounted in the future tense, 'This is what will happen', is similarly problematic. By introducing this tentative note into her narrative, Atwood draws attention to the mythic and allegorical aspect of *Bodily Harm*. When Rennie asks Dr Minnow why, given the odds against him, he persists in his efforts to bring just and stable government to St Antoine, he replies: 'You do it because everyone tells you it is not possible. They cannot imagine things being different. It is my duty to imagine, and they know that for even one person to imagine is very dangerous to them...' (p. 229). *Bodily Harm* involves not only its central character, but also its readers in a journey of the imagination where they are asked to contemplate both the fact of individual mortality and the conditions under which the great mass of the world's population have to live, so that through the exercise of imagination they may be led to a more aware, more compassionate, politically committed view of life. As Atwood herself has said in her address to the 1981 world meeting of Amnesty International:

Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill ... regimes all over the world would not be at such pains to exterminate them.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1982), p. 16. Subsequent references will be in brackets immediately following quotations.
2. J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated by Jack Sage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 228-9.
3. J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 130.

4. D.W. Robertson, jr., *A Preface to Chaucer Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1963), p. 373.
5. Basil Cottle, *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967).
6. Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971). The drawing was executed by William Kimber to a design suggested by Atwood. See Judith McCombs, 'Atwood's Haunted Sequences' in *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, ed. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1981), p. 47.
7. *Power Politics*, p. 7.
8. George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (N.Y.: O.U.P., 1966), p. 102.
9. Margaret Atwood, 'Amnesty International: an Address' in *Second Words* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982), p. 397.

# Book Reviews

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Christopher Koch, *The Dobleman*. London: Chatto & Windus, April 1985. £8.95.

*The Dobleman* is a gripping study in enchantment, explicitly permeated with fairy lore which is simultaneously rooted in precisely depicted common experience. It is a measure of Christopher Koch's art that he manages skillfully to integrate the two modes so that the story's allusiveness is never distracting: rather it deepens the reader's understanding of the characters and their predicament, so that the two aspects of the book combine in an original and insightful vision.

Christopher Koch did something similar in his previous novel, where he drew together the traditional Javanese shadow puppet theatre, *wayang kulit*, with the story of Sukarno's fall, allowing the first to give shape to the second. In *The Dobleman* this strategy is more extensively developed and more generally illuminating. *The Year of Living Dangerously* was, in a sense, an exotic tale: *The Dobleman*, though it takes place in the antipodes and makes use of sharply differentiated settings in Hobart and Sydney, is an exemplary tale which touches the experience of everyone who underwent the cultural disruption of the fifties and sixties. These decades, it will be remembered, culminated in the sinister fairy tale of Magical Mystery tours and psychedelic experience. Christopher Koch's new novel is, amongst other things, a fictional investigation of this pursuit of strange gods and spiritual shortcuts which has become a pervasive, and accepted, aspect of recent Western culture.

The revival of interest in fairies which goes along with other supernatural preoccupations has usually emphasised the *glamour* of fairyland, particularly as it was depicted by certain late nineteenth century or decadent illustrators whose work is sometimes retrospectively regarded as foreshadowing — or somehow linked with — the visionary images inspired by psychedelic drugs. But fairies, as they are described in traditional ballads and folk-tales are sinister and dangerous because of their seductive intercourse with human beings. *The Dobleman* traces the fortunes of a group of people who are seduced by the *glamour* and succumb to its sinister results. They are either enthralled, or in the case of Darcy Burr, obsessed with the possibly supernatural power which will enable them to hold others in thrall.

The book sustains a carefully articulated match between the realistic story and fairy tale, which is made explicit through the use of epigraphs from traditional ballads and passages which explain certain parallels in the story. For example, the narrator's infantile paralysis which is realistically depicted at the beginning of the novel is related to the lore about changelings in a later passage. Such passages are not, incidentally, over-explanatory; they arise naturally from the narrator's conscious interest in fairy lore as he grows up in the sixties. The fairy tale dimension of the book is therefore motivated by the development of character, and the book traces the psychological aspects of belief in the supernatural. At the same time, certain fairy tale motifs contribute to its incidental and overall structure. Three are made quite explicit: 'The False Knight Upon the Road', 'Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Tam Lin'; others will no doubt emerge from close reading and study.

At the centre of the novel are the narrator, Richard Miller, and his two Tasmanian friends who later form a pop-music group with two others; the narrator's Estonian wife, Katrin, and the stepson of the woman who once enchanted him. The novel turns on the artfully chosen narrative angle, for the narrator is involved with the others, yet partly separated from them, since he does not belong to the pop group (though for a time he is its producer). This enables Christopher Koch to tell two interwoven stories: one of the narrator's enchantment, beginning in childhood; the other of the development of the pop group whose songs based on fairy ballads sound a resonant note in the cultural confusion of the late sixties. It also facilitates the drawing of fine distinctions in the narrator's relationships with the others, and in particular to the two Tasmanians: the school hero, Brady, who resists enchantment and Darcy Burr, the increasingly sinister Puckish disciple of the doubleman, Broderick.

The first of these stories, which defines the scope of the novel, focusses on the narrator's psychological development. His enchantment begins during his convalescence from infantile paralysis. Cut off from others by this, his imagination evolves around his toy theatre and fairy stories, particularly a couple of Danish tales which he finds in a collection which is possibly Thomas Keightly's *The Fairy Mythology*.<sup>1</sup> An important allusive thread — the link between enchantment and art — is thus established from the beginning. At the same time, the art of the book is shaped by fairy narratives. The opening scene, for example, where the crippled Richard Miller encounters the figure who turns out to be the doubleman, is, as the sub-title makes clear, an explicit counterpart to the opening motif of the ballad 'The False Knight Upon the Road'. Many — probably most — of the incidents in the book have this extra dimension, but an important aspect of Christopher Koch's narrative strategy is the way their allusiveness is played down, even when it is sometimes made explicit. The incidents and scenes stand up in their own right; they do not need the allusions, though they are enriched by them.

The account of the narrator's enchantment is developed in detail as he falls under the spell of the woman Deidre and of the Broderick, and becomes involved in Darcy Burr's pursuit of power through both fame and the supernatural. This illuminates the other story in the book: the account of the success of the pop group in a milieu in which a spiritual breakdown exposes people to the *glamour* of the fairy world and to other forms of superstitious cultishness, and through the coincidence of the two stories, Christopher Koch suggests an interpretation of this disturbing phase of recent Western culture.

*The Doubleman* is an intricately structured novel in which every element is precisely motivated and related. Other recent revisions of fairy tales have often been an excuse for abandoning the constraints of realistic fiction, but Christopher Koch has set himself the more difficult problem of telling a credible (and richly suggestive) story which has the attributes of a fairy tale. This is not a 'playful' book, but one in which the allusive dimension is always motivated by the depiction of character, incident and setting. Christopher Koch is a master of 'tea-tabling' as it was understood by E.M. Forster; this is, essentially, a fictional mode in which everything — and especially sensational incidents and profundities — is precisely understated. There is a fashion just now for novels which proclaim their own artifice and loudly compel the reader to applaud their innovations. The noise these generate should not obscure the qualities of finer work like *The Doubleman*, which contains great depths in a beautifully articulated narrative.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

## NOTE

1. I am indebted to my colleague, Mr James Stewart for pointing out to me this possible source, and for identifying the two Danish ballads as 'Elverskud' (the Danish title is untranslatable, but means a mortal wound as a result of being shot by an arrow fired by elves) and 'Hr Bøsmere i elvehjem' (Sir Bosmere in the land of the elves).

Barbara Hanrahan, *Kewpie Doll*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1984. £2.95.

*Kewpie Doll*, Barbara Hanrahan's eighth book in just over ten years, is described by her publishers as a novel, though like her first, it has the attributes of autobiography. It recapitulates and even revises images and incidents from the earlier book in a way that identifies its narrator with the Hanrahan who relates the explicitly autobiographical *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973), and the same circle of family and friends appears in both books. At its centre are the grandmother, great-aunt Reece — a victim of Down's syndrome — and the widowed mother. The two books are subjective accounts of a girl growing up in this family in Adelaide during the war and post-war years, and while the first is focussed upon childhood and the second takes the story up to the narrator's twenty-third year, there is an extensive overlap between them. An important event in both, the family's move from an inner to an outer suburb, which occurs around the narrator's pubescence, concludes the first book, and is placed exactly at the centre of the second.

The later book is really only a novel in the sense that any autobiographical writing is. Christopher Isherwood once argued that the very process of recording experience pushed it towards fiction, and his own books were conscious explorations of the borderland between autobiography and the novel, but *Kewpie Doll* is nothing like them. It resembles more closely the explicitly autobiographical writings of Hal Porter. Like Porter, Barbara Hanrahan details the atmosphere of a particular place and time by reference to advertisements and popular songs, and by lists of local products like Kitchener buns, Violet Crumble Bars, Fishaphos, Nixoderm, Vicks Vapour Rub, Old Dutch Cleanser, Gumption and Pond's Vanishing Cream. Discerning readers of Australian literature will have encountered some of these already in the sketches of Barry Humphries and the writings of Patrick White and Hal Porter, amongst other places, but in *Kewpie Doll*, they will discover a specifically South Australian milieu through allusions to the Beehive corner, Balfour's cakes, Woodroffe's lemonade, Snow-Top Champagne, Menz Yo-Yo biscuits, Flower Day, Gandy and Eskimo Pies. I missed any reference to Bickford's lime juice or Faulding's Soltyptol soap (though Lifebuoy is mentioned) and noticed a few inaccuracies. The deliciously cloying soft drink made to taste like passion fruit with large quantities of sugar was, as I remember, called *Passiona* and not, as the narrator remembers it, *Passionella*.

Perhaps too much of *Kewpie Doll* is filled out with this kind of naming and listing which is becoming a mannerism in Australian writing, though Barbara Hanrahan uses it like Porter, to evoke a milieu sympathetically, rather than like Humphries and White, to mock the vulgarity of Australian suburban life.

This is not the only aspect of *Kewpie Doll* which is reminiscent of Porter's autobiographies. There is occasionally a similar use of the historic present and the narrative perspec-

tive it connotes. However, where Porter's vocabulary is rich and his sentence patterns and prose rhythms complex, Barbara Hanrahan's prose in *Kewpie Doll* is composed almost entirely of simple sentences embodying single observations and images. Such writing is, of course, only apparently simple, and difficult to sustain without monotony. It depends entirely on the freshness and accuracy of the images and the effects which can be gained by linking them precisely. The very simplicity of this style makes it easy to strike a false note, and there are patches of undigested research in this book which tip over into travel brochure writing.

On the other hand, there are passages in *Kewpie Doll* where the individual details combine to evoke a rich sense of place and time. This is particularly the case with the chapters dealing with suburban life. Even these, however, are rather less complex and rhythmically varied than many passages in *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, where, for example, the rhythms of the opening paragraphs spring off from the epigraph by Marvell. Curiously, in rewriting her childhood experiences in *Kewpie Doll*, Barbara Hanrahan has simplified — I would suggest, over-simplified — her prose, and the later book is, in this respect, less successful than the first.

There are, however, compensations. Though it no doubt contains an element of fiction, the centre of interest in *Kewpie Doll* is the imaginative growth of the narrator who, we have reason to suspect, represents the young Barbara Hanrahan, and the book is skillfully organized to let this process accelerate to its climax in the closing pages. *Kewpie Doll* develops an idea which the author had already explained in *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, that she was always aware of two selves. On the one hand she is the person the world, and especially her family, want her to be; on the other, she senses a different identity inside this person. The struggle between these two selves is the dramatic focus of the book.

In this respect, the book is like a thematically conventional *Bildungsroman*, but it is a quite original version of the form. Firstly, this is because of the surprising difference between the narrator's two selves. Outwardly she is an ordinary suburban girl whose horizons are bounded by the commercial class in high school, the local picture theatre and the dissenting evangelical churches which are such a notable feature of the Adelaide suburbs. She and her family seem to be precisely the kind of people who are mocked in all the easy satires of Australian suburbia. Inwardly, she possesses a gifted imagination through which she can transform and transcend her outer experience. Whereas the typical *Bildungsroman* usually focusses upon the protagonist's inner life and his struggle *against* his environment, Barbara Hanrahan devotes a large part of *Kewpie Doll* to her narrator's outer life and suburban milieu. Her development is not depicted as a struggle *against* it; rather it is described with insight and understanding as something which nurtures an authentic aspect of the narrator's identity. *Kewpie Doll* thus gives the reader a richer inside view of the misunderstood and easily ridiculed Australian suburbs than we have ever had before, except perhaps in the author's first book, and its extensive use of naming and listing serves not only to evoke this world but also to create the values and expectations which the narrator, in her outer self, tries to meet.

Secondly, Barbara Hanrahan presents her narrator fairly passively in relation to her two selves. Admittedly, her inner self does take control at the end and she decides to follow the difficult path of the artist, but the break with the suburban world is painful and full of sadness. It is not presented as a victory, and the outer self is not rejected. Up until the end, the narrator registers both outer and inner experience neutrally. This is consistent with the sympathetic portrayal of the outer world, and perhaps justifies the extremely simple prose style.

The narrative mode of *Kewpie Doll* is child-like, and at times, childish. This no doubt

reflects Barbara Hanrahan's belief (expressed in her *Australian Literary Studies* interview with Julie Mott) in the importance of the child's vision of things, but it runs into difficulties, even in a short book like *Keupie Doll*. There is an obvious problem of sustaining interest and avoiding a prattling tone, but beyond this, there is the danger of slipping into coyness and mannerisms. Unfortunately, these are not always avoided. Sometimes the style is cute: 'Once my mother was matron of honour at Doris from work's wedding', or 'The station-master and the girl had a baby that turned into a detective', and occasionally, it has a coy allusiveness: 'the big store in the city where they said your money went farthest' (South Australian readers will recognize this as John Martins). Expressions like the latter possibly result from a clash between the attempt to sustain a child-like tone and a tendency to over-explain the previously undescribed world of Adelaide. Something like this probably accounts for the many expressions like 'At the corner of the street is the School. First it *meant* Infants...', 'Commercial *meant* Typewriting, Shorthand, Book-keeping', 'Teachers' College *meant* dances...' or 'The birthday parties *meant* hundreds and thousands on the cakes' (my italics), where it is pure mannerism, like the frequent use of kindergarten periphrases like 'did rape', 'did torture' and 'did murder'.

More pervasive are the non-sequiturs which might be justified as reflecting unexplained associations in the child's mind, but which do not really add up to anything because they are over-worked to the point of affectation: 'Mrs Willoughby next door asks my grandmother if I've got my period yet, the bark is flaking off the rustic fern pots, the fuchsia bush taps at the broken panes of the ruined glass-house', 'I found his name in a book in Aunt Margaret's bookcase — it was mine, not theirs (*The Lost Trail*, with a Red Indian in a canoe on the cover); I stole it away, put it down my jumper, but Roger caught me and told. I went to see the footie Grand final when I was a baby', 'so long ago it is a dream and the celluloid swan sails on the pocket mirror lake, I stole the milkjug cover fringed with glass beads, the Pierrot's costume had black pompoms.' Torn from their contexts, these passages may seem more awkward than they really are in the book, but there are too many similar examples. The initial charm of this style palls, and although Barbara Hanrahan moderates it towards the end of the book, she does not manage to control the connection between style and the developing consciousness of the protagonist with anything like the precision of, say, Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

This flaws a book which is nevertheless delightful for its deep insight into Australian suburban life and its sensitive account of the growth of an artistic imagination in that milieu.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

Ross McMullin, *Will Dyson: Cartoonist, Etcher and Australia's Finest War Artist*. London: Angus & Robertson, 1984. 337 pp. £16.50.

This is the first major biography of the man who is best known in Australia as her finest war artist. But, as this book reveals, he was much more than this; eventually his claim to fame may well rest on his work as a political cartoonist. Born in Australia in 1880, Dyson



came to England in 1909 in the hope of finding the recognition he had failed to find in Australia. His opportunity came when he was appointed cartoonist for the newly founded *Daily Herald* which had begun its life in 1911 as the London printers' strike sheet. Dyson's front-page cartoons together with the captions he added to them were passionate attacks on capitalism, inequality and suffering and they created a sensation. His attacks ranged far and wide: on the Labour leaders who deserted their class; on Botha, 'the man behind the gun'; on those who refused to grant women their rights. Wherever injustice existed, Dyson was there to expose it. His cartoons were printed in book form, as post cards and posters; he was acclaimed by men such as Wells, Chesterton, Shaw and Orage; the *Daily News* wrote, 'Mr Dyson, whether you like or hate him, is a force in contemporary England.'

Fiercely anti-militarist he was also patriotic and when Australia entered the war he volunteered his services as their war artist. What he produced was no false glorification of war; if in his drawings of the men of Anzac he captured the special qualities of that group, their endurance and sardonic humour, he also revealed in the tense and weary faces of his soldiers all the horrors of the Western Front and of a war in which the victims were the exploited working classes of both sides. Not surprisingly he was critical of the Versailles Treaty and his protest about it produced for the *Herald* his most famous cartoon, 'Peace and Future Cannon Fodder', in which he predicted the outcome of World War II even to the year. He left political journalism for some time but, appalled by the Depression, he entered the arena once more. This time his prime target attack was the Central Banker 'who goes to his work of sweetness and light, wrecking a nation or two here ... all in the name of a Holy Principle — the Principle of sound Banking Practice'.

Disillusioned after World War I, how much more would Dyson be today if he could see the causes for which he fought still not won and the injustices he opposed as rampant as ever. The wealth is no more evenly distributed, one half of the world sits with its mountains of grain and butter whilst the other half starves; increased technology has led, as Dyson predicted, to unemployment but it has not led to a new attitude to leisure, as he had hoped, but to resistance by employers to the 35-hour week; the armaments race continues accompanied by price increases and cuts in social welfare, 'Daddy, what makes the cost of living go up? The cost of dying, my son' (caption to Dyson cartoon). As Mrs Thatcher sees the pit strike as another Falklands with Galtieri as the enemy without and Arthur Scargill as 'the enemy within' we recall Dyson's cartoon 'Profit and His Paramour'. The caption reads, 'In times of war the Labourer and his class protects the State from peril, but in times of peace — if we may believe the theory of the Profiteers — the Labourer merely provides the peril!.'

The book is lavishly illustrated with over two hundred drawings and photographs. One point of irritation is the failure on numerous occasions of the author to provide reference notes to sources quoted. This is a surprising omission given the fact that the author is an archivist with Australian archives and a researcher himself. It is a small minus in an important book in which Dyson's message is as relevant now as when he first preached it.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

Jayanta Mahapatra, *Life Signs* (Delhi: OUP, 1983). 48 pp. £3.25.  
 Evan Jones, *Left at the Post* (St Lucia, Queensland: Queensland UP). 56 pp. Hb \$9.95, pb \$4.95.  
 Philip Mead, *This River Is in the South* (St Lucia, Queensland: Queensland UP, 1984). 50 pp. Hb \$9.95, pb \$4.95.  
 Syd Harrex, *Atlantis and Other Islands* (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1984). 47 pp. £2.50, Aus \$4.95.  
 Nigel Roberts, *Steps for Astaire* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1983). 101 pp. No price given.  
 Philip Salom, *The Projectionist* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983). 88 pp. \$7.50.  
 Roland Robinson, *Selected Poems* (Armidale, NSW: Kardoorair Press, 1983). 82 pp. \$7.95.  
 Les A. Murray, *The People's Otherworld* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1983). 68 pp. No price given.  
*The Blue Wind: Poems in English from Pakistan* (Budleigh Salterton, Devon: Interim Press, 1984). 39 pp. £2.40.  
 Alamgir Hashmi, *This Time in Lahore* (no place of publication: Vision Press, 1983). 65 pp. Rs 60, US\$6.00.

The life signs in Jayanta Mahapatra's book are the expected ones, the archetypal symbols of religion and art, but given a sombre power by the bleakness and compassion of the poet's view. Water, the symbol of life and regeneration, appears in many of the poems, though in an ambiguous and often threatening way. In 'The Wound' it is an image of transience, for the wound in our souls (the terror and restlessness which assail us in the dead of night) makes us see how 'the applause of the stars,/ the existing structure of order' are 'traceless on the water'. By day we repress such knowledge, though the fear remains, acknowledged perhaps by the child, 'sacred relic,/ growing up with the helplessness and the generous tears', but faced by adults only in the nightmare images of folktale,

the old terror of water where bleeding skeletons  
 keep crawling through the mists,  
 and the grey walls of our rooms.

Life signs are continually called into question, for they can no longer serve us unequivocally, as in the old way of religion, as symbols of transcendence. In 'Dead River' the river has lost its ancient spiritual dimension, it is a 'tamed temple god' and is likened to

a father left with a picture  
 of his traceless son, perhaps dead,  
 grey with determination, and infinite skies.

Definitions of the river are mirrored in human terms of loss and helplessness.

'Firefly' contains the line 'what cry is it of the dead that refuses to be quiet?' and as in 'The Wound' we are plunged into shadows, darkness literal and spiritual, as well as into

the world of shades, ghosts. For the dead are inescapable in these poems, our consciousness of the past being part of the continuum in which we live, with 'the dim consciousness that everything/ perhaps is a dream' ('The Cannon'), yet a dream in which suffering and poverty go on. A rusted cannon from the Raj is 'graceless in the throes of history's nightmare'. The poems are anchored in our daily living, yet pass beyond the humdrum concerns of so much Western 'domestic' verse. Human life, the mind, nature, are used as fact and image in Mahapatra's poems, nature being explored at times in images derived from mind, while humanity is read constantly in terms of the natural symbols of the river, water, darkness and shadow. The poems are philosophical, not the mere recreations of mood and incident, though the touchstone for them is always the value of the lives of men, women and children, caught briefly in the world of pain and poverty.

'A Country' is Mahapatra's country, a part of Asia dominated by hunger, where 'the air is burnt' and 'incense and ash', sacrifice and death, predominate. Darkness again descends; in the night the old reminisce, but their eyes 'are dead as stone'. Childhood surfaces: 'Here is my world, and it makes me dream as a child'; yet he retains an adult's consciousness and sense of hurt at the meaningless deaths of the young. It is the sense of hurt that prevails, everything centres on the decaying, hunger-ridden land; the 'age-old myths' are told again and again, but no longer have the power to make sense out of human suffering.

The life signs glimmer fitfully in these poems. In 'Summer's End' the decaying season is also a season of the mind. It is night again, night which is imagined as an old and wrinkled face.

A pariah dog howls at the front gate,  
the instant turns away  
like a practiced whore  
from one who loves her

— fine lines which image the lovelessness and loneliness of this world, where women are old, or cold-eyed whores of the back streets, or young girls dying before puberty, and before fulfilment, or more likely humiliation, in adulthood. The river, ancient life sign, is 'deep in the hills/ of my blood', but unreachable. The poet is helpless, 'I can do nothing for you, dear friend', for there is only the pity and the sense of aloneness. Darkness has a kind of solidity in these poems, but the ordinary events of day — women tarring a road, a barge of hay, lepers going home 'their helpless looks/ drawing fantasies on the town square' — these things seem unreal, or have a reality the poet cannot grasp: 'Even in the bright sun/ this was a world I did not know' ('Again, One Day, Walking By the River').

In this poem as elsewhere in the collection, images derived from the human are used as analogues for states in nature, which create disturbing and dream-like effects:

It is two in the afternoon, and  
the heat of yesterday still clings to the old walls  
like harsh salt on the skin.

Nature and mind are freely interchangeable as analogues for one another:

From the tamarind's shade  
I watch my loneliness come. Who would think  
it was like the wind that belonged nowhere?

('June'). Loneliness and a sense of desolation pervade the poems, 'I can't remember hearing anyone/ saying he will mourn for me when I am gone' ('Again, One Day, Walking By the River'), but *Life Signs* is not nihilistic like the work of Philip Larkin where, in the end, nothing is of value. In the blurb, Mahapatra is compared to Wordsworth. The differences between the two poets are profound, yet in one sense at least the comparison is just, for few poets in our century have evoked 'The still, sad music of humanity' so movingly as Mahapatra. This is a fine collection.

Evan Jones' *Left at the Post* centres on divorce and its aftermath, so that it might almost be termed a collection of genre poems, so popular has the subject been in the post War world. Some of these poems are good: 'Thinking of Suicide', for example, where a man eating at home alone thinks back to a threat of suicide he once made in an effort to keep the woman he loved. It didn't work, of course, and now he's glad, though still feeling the smart of 'sullen shame'. He imagines what might have happened if he had carried out his threat and swum out to sea... but he's not like that, and middle-aged acceptance recognizes the absurdity of the reverie:

Only a passing thought: it makes him smile  
as Handel strikes out on a glorious tune.  
It's getting rather cold, it's rather late.  
No-one is there to watch him as he licks his plate.

The relationship of art to domestic grief is suggested in several of the poems. In 'Thinking of Suicide' the recording of Handel, half listened to while he eats, seems above the humdrum loneliness of the individual. In another good poem, 'Genre Painting', Jones suggests that such dispiritedness can only be captured by minor art. He reflects on a painting showing a man and a woman sitting in the gloom: 'It's an inconspicuous thing', yet it holds the attention sadly, for, the suggestion is, its 'dull meticulous rendering of grief' hints at our own unfulfilled lives, which must be lived out in confines rarely explored by great art with its 'bravura ... enhancing life'.

Other poems are less successful: 'Drinking with Friends', for example, where a low-keyed colloquialism

It seemed  
to me I stammered, others talked: I'm damned  
if I can remember getting much of a hearing.  
My friends remember me as domineering.

is alternated with what is meant to be a bitter mock-Elizabethan refrain: '*Sing hey, sing hey for those yesterdays, / the brilliant chat and its wanton ways....*' The ideal here and in several other poems is the taut witty style of Donne in which language approximating the colloquial is held in check by the demands of rhythm and rhyme. But Evan Jones is not able to sustain this, and the mundane language and the rhymes jar.

There is a sprinkling of light verse in the collection which might have been omitted. 'The One-Eyed Giant' is an updating of Arthurian romance in which the giant isn't a bad sort of chap, watches the 'telly' etc. Sir Cei and Sir Bedwyr, out on 'one of their admirable murderous quests', behead him, however, after being asked in to dinner, and the poem ends:

...while one loots,  
the other plays and sings to his mandolin,  
'It was all for the love of a lady.'  
God knows why the poor bastard let them in.

It's the sort of poem that goes down well at a reading where no one wants anything serious, but such debunking is too easy.

In 'Poem just after midnight: summer: at home' are the lines

When  
my bones are washed quite white, who will  
remember my patient efforts to mimic  
in words the smaller rhythms  
of private life with its rewards and frustrations?  
Somebody might.

Yet, the poem continues,

It hardly seems to matter  
as I listen again for the wind to toss the trees,  
the whole stir of a world  
moving away.

In English-language poetry of the last forty years there has been an over-emphasis on the domestic, the small griefs of the individual. Great poetry captures that sense of 'the whole stir of a world/ moving away', but to do so means taking chances with your life and art. There are moments in this collection where Evan Jones shows what he might attempt beyond the rather easily accepted confines of minor poetry.

*This River is in the South* by Philip Mead is an ambitious collection which attempts a fusion of the sensuous with the intellectual where poems often use precisely evoked images of nature as a springboard for philosophical speculation. In 'Magnificence' the rain forest becomes a symbolic landscape of the mind, a primeval world where the 'I' is the first explorer, where maps lose their relevance, become sodden, 'the road like a blood vessel/ unwinding inwards through the fabric' — the fabric being map, body and mind. The idea is developed through a series of fine images:

Half the tree's roots are feeding on air, where  
the bank has been leeches away. Or they

are flowing, clasping the four red chambers  
of the heart and feeding their fabric.

Mead, however, extends the poem unduly by making explicit what has already been evoked through imagery:

What world are we walking in. Where the ways  
out of time are brief and through language.

Where is the mind's place. I am saying it is  
not here or here, but has its place in

metamorphosis, at the taking place, at  
moments which are far from this one.

There is a tendency in these poems to talk about language, about meaning, in a way which is praised in the blurb for its modernity, but which often seems unduly self-conscious and even *passé* — the poem drawing attention to itself as artefact — done to death by a certain kind of American poetry in the post War period. Occasionally other arts are also used, to draw the reader's attention to the ways in which art, nature and human perception feed off one another. In 'Revisiting Monaro' are the lines

Against the sea-grey  
morning sky, the cockatoos  
are motionless strokes  
of zinc white on bare branches.  
They have been painted  
in by Boyd.

The description is fine, giving exactly the visual quality of the cockatoos *and* their image in the work of a painter like Boyd: 'motionless strokes', 'zinc white' — everything necessary is here, and the last sentence is redundant, pointing too insistently, making sure the reader understands. The reader comprehends through the images, however, and the mention of Boyd merely makes his response self-conscious rather than luminous.

The problem is even more pressing in poems like '*Wisse Das Bild*' and 'Thinking and Speaking Are Different' which deal with language, meaning and perception overtly, and where Mead attempts philosophy but often ends with didacticism: 'But at the same time we can't turn this/ knowledge back on ourselves; that is the mistake.' Mead attempts here and elsewhere in the collection to create that interface between sensuous awareness, personal experience, reverie, aesthetic and philosophical speculation, which A.R. Ammons has made his own in the States. But it is a difficult achievement, and the danger is a species of earnest instruction, or a mish-mash of unconnected experience which, despite the blurb, doesn't always reveal 'surprising connections between apparently disparate states and experiences'. Ammons achieves this in his best work by a process of expansion, as in long poems like *Sphere* and 'Pray Without Ceasing', where the philosophy is almost smuggled in under the guise of the poet communing with himself or an ideal reader. Mead similarly needs to evolve a long poem to achieve his ambitions; in the shorter pieces of this collection there is a danger of foreshortening, of feeling the need to press home a point which comes close to hectoring. The lines I have just quoted from 'Thinking and Speaking Are Different' continue: 'Because we want to know it is like this, like that./ It isn't.'

In a poem like 'The Terrain', a highly successful reworking of the themes of 'Magnificence', Mead is more in control, content to let the images work by themselves, without the irritating need to explain:

Walk until your wrists are thin and brown  
and your hands fanned out into ferns,

your hair lying along the backs of leaves.  
At the end lie down and fill your mouth with earth  
and feel your skull-plates shifting slowly

mending with birth Gondwanaland to continent.

In shorter poems this is all that is necessary. In attempting the philosophical poem, he needs to be at once more expansive and to have made clear to himself what precisely he wants to say. At any event the reader should not be bullied.

The centre piece of Syd Harrex's collection is the title poem 'Atlantis', a sequence of thirteen sonnets. The poem interlaces Atlantis as the preserve of scholars and archaeologists with the Atlantis of myth which survives in the imagination as a symbol of lost perfection, and also of the impermanence and uncertainty of human achievement. Harrex builds onto this his own suggestions of Atlantis as a symbol of the individual's quest for integration, a quest which makes living 'on an active volcano/ instead of safe ground' not an act of foolhardiness, but one of spiritual daring — a balancing perpetually on the edge of disaster which tunes the mind to a delicate pitch of awareness, lost to those who prefer to run from 'the way of lava risk'. The inhabitants of present-day Thera have this ability quite literally, 'knowing that devotion to volcanoes,/ like bull worship, is a fierce devotion', something they have perhaps remotely inherited, 'Some gift of Minoan sperm and soft speech?'

As the poems proceed, the narrator who is speculating on a friend's search for this balance at the edge of destruction, interfaces scenes from our civilization, contrasting eruptions of racial violence in London's Notting Hill with his, the narrator's, stay in a 'wholemeal suburb' with *The Times* and Haydn's music for company — symbols of a seemingly indestructible order. The surface of England, unruffled but decayed, appears as outcrop material in the poems: the England of 'politely bright British flowers', England 'in feeble slumber', waiting for rain.

The sequence also explores the relation of art to myth and to the utilitarianism that dominates our lives.

'Evil is the responsibility  
of poets, not legislators,' he said,  
'Is art moral? Should we live as legend,  
or scansion of facts that form no picture?'

The answer is not easy: the human spirit needs myth to shape life, and Atlantis is or has been one such myth; but it can also be an escape. To seek in present-day Thera the old Atlantean perfection

the island he discovered was all symbols  
of the necessary life contiguous  
with myth: sculptured stone, cycles of woman  
and death, peasant food and wine, Atlantis.

is to seek to live out another's myth, another's life. As tourists on the island they play at myth-making: his friend's girl becomes 'the Goddess of the Serpents/ and he the Prince of the Lilies', but 'Their hubris was to dare the bull's power/ to *uproot* their love, their deathless flower' (my italics). The perfection embodied in myth must be sought within,

and will always temper joy with sorrow, as in Michelangelo's statue of Moses, 'left profile sublime, the other torment'.

The sequence is complex in ways which it is only possible to hint at here, and in fact the concerns of 'Atlantis' inform the collection as a whole, which is largely set in Greece. 'Cotzia Square', for example, continues the debate on the myth-making function of the poet. Outside his bank there is a blind seller of lottery tickets, 'with eyes like painted stone' — 'he was my idea/ of a deity of commerce: perennial as financial fear'. One day though he is not there. The bank functions, impersonal and precise as ever, but a sense of disappointment overtakes the poet: the world has been reduced to computerized facts —

Nothing failed — machine, nor mind —  
and yet I felt forlornly cheated;  
momentarily, quite blind.

Another example of the ways in which 'scansion of facts that form no picture' ('Atlantis') take over and deaden our lives.

One other poem which picks up shock waves from the 'Atlantis' sequence is 'And Agamemnon Dead', where the modern Athens of concrete and military oppression is contrasted with its historical and mythic past, the great city apparently deserted by its tutelary deity Pallas Athene. Most moving is part two which relates the tourist's encounter with the world of brute fact and his helplessness in the face of it. A bus is stopped by state police and a retarded boy is beaten into silence by his frightened father for gesticulating and trying to articulate something about the police.

His father pulped him into whimpering silence,  
and offered the uniforms sycophantic homage.  
The gods were appeased by the sacrifice.

In other poems Harrex exhibits a tactile and visual imagination which can produce memorable results

Good Friday Night:  
black wool  
of knitted people  
in a lemon dye  
of candlelight

('Easter in Athens') — but here the style is honed down, matter-of-fact, and precisely right for the moment. For the narrator is dumb, does not understand what has been said, yet understands its tragic import:

I think that child  
was the enemy of the state...  
a conception of civilization  
his half-blocked mind could not understand.  
I think his bruised wet face told me surely  
of tortured Freedom, enchained, in prison.

*Atlantis and Other Poems* is well worth reading.



In Nigel Roberts' *Steps for Astaire* we are offered prose chopped up into quick-moving, fast-talking jive — verses which introduce friends and girlfriends ('Don', 'Annie', 'Sid', etc.), sex, modern jazz, Neruda, and poet-'mates' in a slick and familiar style. This is the Sixties world of the Liverpool poets and their American prototypes all over again, where everything may be, and usually is, debased for a laugh. The book is full of such memorable lines as

the phone call said;  
get your dick down  
to the Clap Clinic

('The Conditions & Provisions for Leave') and

Where I come from  
an invitation to dinner  
means come over & fuck  
& as I got out of the taxi  
I realized  
that I had forgotten my diaphragm  
& didn't bring a condom  
& he I knew  
hadn't had a vasectomy...

('Happy Hour in the Noe Valley Bar & Grill'). The blurb describes Roberts as 'the journalist of the id, the desperate reporter getting the facts, sending off despatches from the front — Balmain, San Francisco, Hollywood, and the various check-in points along the way'. Anyone who wants to be reminded of what the dated, and dented, 'in' attitudes of the Sixties were, should consult this volume.

The projectionist of the title of Philip Salom's collection is literally a film projectionist, an old man burnt in an accident in the projection room, who now spends his time watching silent films in his work shed; but he is also the poet, who projects images in words. Like Philip Mead, Salom attempts at times an ambitious philosophical poetry which discusses the nature of reality in relation to memory, art, aesthetics, the word. But only the greatest poetry can handle these themes with conviction, and usually only by indirection. When Mead writes philoophy/aesthetics the poetry tends to tip over into the abstracted and cerebral, describing a state of mind, rather than evoking it. In 'Valley' he presents an idyllic valley scene; everything is perfect, only 'a protagonist/ is missing'. Then three hikers appear and he notices 'bulldozer tracks in the sand'. His need for a cinematographic perfection is shattered; 'I burn the scene back/ free of men' — and the 'I' tries to evoke again his perfect images. There is good writing in the poem:

Sunlight's  
fine crystal  
spills down the slope  
...  
the river water  
is a slow fallen branch;

but the poem collapses at the end under the weight of an abstracting, philosophizing play on 'word' and 'world' which arises from the poet's desire to impart significance to the scene:

I burn the scene back  
free of men,  
my melancholic sun  
comes back sound and image  
this alone protagonist, this  
word, slow branch  
of water  
come from nowhere  
spilling nowhere, this word  
first and last of the world  
continuing, delivering  
the heart  
nowhere.  
Paper-thin.

There are nonetheless good poems in the collection: 'The Killing', for example, which describes the projectionist (also the poet's landlord) killing a calf for the winter. There is a chilling precision and sensuousness here, as he describes the man skinning the animal as it hangs

neck  
slashed, eyes' white madness  
dragging their sockets.

The man is oblivious:

his eyes and palms  
move on the white selvage  
slowly — with near  
maddening slowness.  
Erotica of exactness.

Here the abstraction of the last line works because it is released from experience, rather than imposed by intellect, pinning down the pleasure of the man, and his skill which is both fascinating and slightly unnerving.

Salom is less in command of a sufficient idiom when he attempts overtly to explore inner states, as in 'Poet', about the disintegration of the psyche. It begins,

On your images burn what I have learned  
of hatred. And when the head is torn apart,  
scatter the pieces to the morning  
knowing this must go on, night after night  
re-assembling.

For months I have terror  
I tell no-one, go down into fear, submit  
to the sodomites of ugliness.

The language is abstracted in a way which is a species of imprecision, very different from a line like 'Birds wheel/ at stone's absoluteness' ('The Coast'), where the abstract noun is used to body forth the massive solidity of the cliff, becoming in a strange way specific in the process. The one image is highly articulate, an embodiment of perception; the other remains cerebral, the description of a state of mind. Philip Salom should concentrate on the first.

*Selected Poems* provides a generous selection of Roland Robinson's work from his first collection *Beyond the Grass-free Spears* published in 1944 to *The Plum Tree* (1978). In the early poems there is a sense of Australia as a grand, unreal dream country for the white man, where the poet is isolated, an intruder. Such a land poses special problems for the artist — and here Robinson touches on what must be a major problem for Australian poets — for its 'otherness' demands a new language if it is to be adequately evoked. 'Black Cockatoos', a fine early poem, describes the jarring, raucous birds, and ends: 'So shall I find me harsh and blendless words/ of barbarous beauty enough to sing this land.' Robinson's poetic career has involved a successful search for such a language, which entails in the process a deepening of his understanding and commitment to the land.

Alienation nevertheless remains a powerful theme. In 'Would I Might Find My Country' blacks who seem at home as they set up camp for the night, are nonetheless displaced, a fact symbolized by the mission blankets among their gear; while the whites who supplanted them have never found the land. One way to do this might be through Aboriginal myths, but for a poet it's a way lined with dangers. The white comes to such myths at second hand, in translation from an alien language and culture. The result can too often be like the European use of Greek and Roman mythology, stylized not internalized. This seems to me the case with Robinson in poems like 'Nerida and the Birwan' and 'The Water-Lubra', where there is a corresponding failure of language. So in the latter poem we read:

He heard, in a noon of silence,  
when only the deep shade is cool,  
voices and splashings and laughter  
that came from a reeded pool.

We're close here to late-Romantic Australian naiads of the stream, and in fact some of the early poems do suffer from a weakness for Yeatsian Romanticism which can produce 'the swans/ passing in querulous cries against the stars' ('Call on the Sea to be Still').

Such influences were soon abandoned, though, and by the late 1940s Robinson had learned to trust his own senses, his own feel for Australia. This emerges in his awareness of the landscape as somehow anonymous, not owing to human connections like a long-settled land. In 'Orchid' the land seems to say 'be still, become inhuman,/ let your veins, as mine, lie cold'. The poet finds this attractive:

Where I pause and make this human  
moan, and own myself outcast,

let me be, in alternation,  
flower, and rock, and voice at last.

Only by accepting his alienation, a prerequisite to accepting the land on its own terms, can the white Australian poet find a true voice. Robinson himself achieves this with growing sureness in this selection, especially in a number of fine poems which evoke the life of the bush ('Lyre-bird', 'Rock Wallaby').

He achieves it also in a Wordsworthian sense of awe mixed with his perception of the land's beauty, and in his understanding of the atavistic fear nature can produce in man. In 'The Sacred Ground' he walks in the bush at night, at peace with himself and the land, until

The hills gave out a tread like sound:  
primeval forms seemed crouching near;  
ventured upon the sacred ground,  
I felt myself gone chill with fear.

The best poems evoke these mixed emotions, 'Kimberley Drovers', for example, and 'The Fitzroy River Crossing', two longer poems, one concerning rest at night after a long day with drovers in the outback; the other about stumbling on an early prospector's grave marker; both suggesting transience, and how the whites have so little real communion with this land.

Poems of the late 1960s and 1970s deepen this vision. 'Wolf' describes a wolf-dog kept as a pet, but chaining, and beating when it kills a neighbour's goat, cannot beat the wolf out of it. Robinson recognises the untameable spirit of something wolf-like in man, too. In 'The Other' he suggests that at night, even in the tamed outer suburbs, something primordial rises in the mind. This is from the collection *Grendel* (1976), which succeeds in evoking the sense of the spirit, the untameability and the primitive fear, which Robinson (like Ted Hughes) sees as lurking behind the civilized façade of our lives. The transference of an Old English mythic figure, itself a symbol of untamed northern nature, to the new world, is powerful because Grendel is recognised as a kind of human other self. The fear we project without, and which in *Beowulf* is killed by the hero, is really something within: we 'kill' part of the self, or try to, for, like it or not, it is really something unkillable, irrepressible.

To an outsider, at least, these poems seem a true contribution to the creation of an Australian poetic sensibility.

Les A. Murray is another poet whose work in the past twenty years has created a genuine Australian voice. Writing in English this is more difficult than it appears. A number of poets in the post-War years, for example, reacted against the dominance of the English poetic tradition in Australia by running into the hands of the Americans. Like Robinson, though in a different way, Murray has chosen his own path, creating out of the multiple cultural resources open to him a poetry that is not Australo-English or -American, but distinctly Australian. His latest collection, *The People's Otherworld*, consolidates his achievement.

Many of the themes of previous volumes find expression here. Murray's very Celtic concern with family and ancestry, for example, surfaces in a fine sequence, 'Three Poems in Memory of My Mother', in which he comes to terms with his mother's death shortly

after a miscarriage, when he was a boy. It's there too in 'The Smell of Coal Smoke' which evokes memories of visits to family in grim industrial Newcastle during the war.

Murray is sometimes criticized for being a 'rural' poet at a time when the thrust of Australian culture is from the cities. This has always seemed to me a misconception, and poems like 'The Smell of Coal Smoke' and, more contemporary, 'The Sydney Highrise Variations', show him at ease with the city and the suburbs in his poetry. The latter is a sequence, one of the best in the collection, which deals critically with the destruction of a section of downtown Sydney to make way for fashionable American-style skyscrapers. The poem may be taken by some as anti-city in its attitudes, but it is not — only anti the monomaniacal drives of big business and its reduction of everything to profit. In fact 'The Sydney Highrise Variations' reveals Murray's sensitivity to the city, his ability to see an eerie beauty in its productions: the Gladesville road bridge, for example, seen from a distance, when

the flyover on its vaulting drum  
is a sketched stupendous ground burst, a bubble raising surface  
or a rising heatless sun with inset horizons.

But

Seen from itself, the arch  
is an abstract hill, a roadway up-and-over without country,  
from below, a ponderous grotto, all entrance and vast shade  
framing blues and levels.

Few poets in English have celebrated the city in this way.

Other poems are concerned with the country, of course, though as often with Murray, who comes from practical farming stock, it's the countryside put to use by man. So 'The Forest Hit By Modern Use' celebrates the great gashes left in virgin forest by timbermen, even down to 'bulldozers'/ imprinted machine-gun belts of spoor'.

Murray's most striking feature as a poet is his ability to create images in a seemingly effortless way which actually change our perception of familiar things. It's a gift few modern English-language poets possess — Ted Hughes has it in England and Seamus Heaney in Ireland — and it is one which informs the best poems in this collection with a memorable life, as in the description of a small boy impelling his scooter on a wet pavement:

his free foot spurning it along,  
his every speeding touchdown  
striking a match of spent light.

*The People's Otherworld* deserves to be widely read.

*The Blue Wind* is a well-produced booklet intended to introduce to an English audience five Pakistani poets, all of whom should be better known in the English-speaking world. Daud Kamal's poems are in some ways reminiscent of the work of Jayanta Mahapatra: there is the same pervading sense of the transitoriness of life; a similar perception of the interconnectedness of the animate and the inanimate; a recognition of suffering as a measure of our lives. Kamal's poems are shorter, more concentratedly lyrical, however, depending

on the image as the vehicle for thought and feeling. The poems are often loaded with a barely contained violence and frustration which are projected onto the world:

The vein  
in the sky's forehead  
swollen today  
will burst tomorrow

(‘Hoof-prints’). In another poem, ‘For Those Who Hate the Moon’, the ‘I’ sits across a dinner-table listening to a foolish woman who ‘prattles on/ about the new architecture’. The next stanza jars the reader, cutting through the empty talk:

Despite the screams of a pair  
of incestuous roses  
in a cut-glass vase  
I dream of embracing  
a new waterfall.

The ‘I’'s barely held equilibrium, imaged in the waterfall and clung to throughout the asinine conversation, is threatened with disintegration in this short poem's last stanza:

It is throbbing again —  
the old vein  
in the back of my head.  
Look at those wolves  
coming down the mountain.

Other poems celebrate moments of peace, still points dependent on the transitoriness that elsewhere causes such near-despair. It's there in the fine poem which gives this anthology its title:

Imagine how it is  
in the mountains —  
the sharpness of pine-needles  
and valleys green with regret.

Chart the flight of birds  
on the night's migratory page.

Clouds melt into one another  
and seeds sprout  
but the rocks stand apart  
asymmetrical in the torrent's rage.

The grey salt of glaciers  
and the stars' inviolate beauty.

Adrian A. Husain is another lyric poet new to me who traces with a delicate touch the transient nature of our lives, though his tone is more elegiac than Kamal's. ‘Kashmiri

Rug' celebrates the Edenic scene on an ancient rug, a world 'Bristling with animals', where 'The clearings trill/ with indelible birds'. It is beautiful, it is where we would like to live, and 'All echo a world once true'. But only

A trick of the yarn  
keeps its colours fresh  
in the pale, antlered dawn.

Another good poem in this mode is 'Cairns' which describes prehistoric grave mounds on hilltops 'above the farm's fecund bustle'; places 'where villager or warrior went aground' (the image finely evoking the idea of ship burial with its hope of a voyage to another life, and ship-wreck seen from the blank stare of modern unbelief). The poem links with a modern instance: his father's white marble tomb which 'contains only clay', where his father 'makes a home/ among ghettoed neighbours'.

How cannily he slips  
into their otiose habits,  
with what ease  
winnowing out his presence!

The lines etch out grief and scepticism in a delicately held balance, which is only troubled by the snatch of holy text from his tombstone which ends the poem: '«Ye that reject faith...»' ('Desert Album: Marble'). There are poems in other moods — a good animal poem, 'Crocodiles' — through the prevailing mood is movingly and memorably elegiac.

Mansoor Y. Sheikh is represented by only four short poems which are insufficient to allow a sure sense of his voice. 'Shalimar' continues the elegiac note — pools 'where jewelled fingers/ once caressed their own reflections', pavements

where you can still  
sense a footfall  
or an occasional sitar crescendo

from the bedchamber

evoke a lost world of grace and aristocratic ease, but all is past in a transitory world, for

they do not take you  
through the inflexions of time  
to where the music swells and nights falter.

It is a good poem, and I would have liked a more generous selection of his work.

Salman Tarik Kureshi is represented by one longish poem, 'Delphi', which is more expansive in form than the lyrics of Kamal, Husain and Sheikh. It narrates a tourist's visit to Delphi, though a tourist with a poet's sensitive eye for detail, for difference:

These mountains are not like ours —  
greyer, older, like folds in a quilt  
tossed down beside the ocean.

The visit, like most tourist trips, is anticlimactic: too many cars and buses, a confusion of races, anonymity, and everyone wondering why they came. When they finally arrive at the temple it is closed. Yet Socrates and Oedipus may have come this way and

We join  
prince, shepherd, priest — the processions  
that have trod this path.

For the oracle, or what it stood for, is still valid; people still need its truths, though 'How few variations there have been/ on the tales foretold by the oracle!' They return in a drizzle of rain.

The waitress in the Pan Taverna,  
who serves us Ouzo and Moussaka  
beneath vine-leaves trained over trellis-work,  
has a cold and a run in her stockings.

(Shades of Sweeney and Madame Sosostris.) 'Her tale too was foretold by oracles.' The poem is a memorable one, and again I would like to see a broader selection of Sheikh's work.

Of the five poets represented here, Alamgir Hashmi is the most Westernised in terms of poetic technique, something most evident in his latest collection *This Time in Lahore* where in many of the poems an expansive *vers libre* is coupled with a low-keyed colloquialism:

I asked my old girl out.  
She gave me a four-year long  
look and put on her sun-glasses

('This Time in Lahore'). It is a style derived from American verse of the 60s and 70s. The title poem, about a visit home after several years' absence, evokes well the tensions in the poet's mind: friends and relatives urge him to stay; but military-governed Pakistan has become a world of lost connections for Hashmi who recalls a story his mother used to tell him of a prince who must journey 'in the valley of voices' where

*he hears his name called  
from every foot-slab of distance  
behind him, but he must not  
turn back to listen.  
If he does, he will turn  
to stone.  
If he does not,  
he can keep on going.*

(Hashmi's italics.) The story is a parable of Hashmi's life: 'No prince', yet he is on a quest and can never turn back.

Hashmi has another style, with its roots in Eliot, Lowell and Dylan Thomas, a sort of Modernist-surrealism which to me is not so successful. Compressed imagery and literary allusion aspire to a portentousness which doesn't quite come off:



Now that morning is soiled,  
and high noon's knock slides in  
like the sun  
carousing to the westward inch.  
Here, then, everywhere,  
I had evened Lord Weary to the Mills  
and scared aloud a pair of sparrows

('Of Mirror-Certain Men'). Hashmi's best poems, like 'This Time in Lahore' and 'A Topical Poem', come out of the tension between his commitment to the West and his still deep familial and cultural roots in Pakistan: like the prince in the story he must go on, but with the voices of the stones sounding in his ears.

JOHN BARNIE

Idi Bukar, *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer*. Radical Arts, an imprint of the Department of English, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. £1.00 paperback.

Idi Bukar is a northern Nigerian poet in his mid 40s. *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer* is a linked sequence of terse political poems that purports to record the fictitious history of a place called 'That Country', a neo-colonial wasteland whose national resources have been squandered by a corrupt ruling elite on the modern equivalents of pacotile — those beads and mirrors the early European traders used to barter for ivory and slaves. 'The Country' is also blessed with a generation of cosseted intellectuals who stand back and watch the contemporary demise, wringing their hands, discussing, but never intervening in any effective way. The irony with which they are portrayed is typical of Idi Bukar's style. The poem is titled 'Necessity' and it begins

The marxists talked about necessity  
the slowly flowing material of time  
It had carried them  
They were there  
They left a table stacked with empty beer bottles  
and shelves of truth  
but had forgotten the necessity  
of what was to be done

Eventually, inevitably, 'the generals took power' and a despot 'The Torturer' — takes charge of the troubled country. But his savagery inspires, at last, a true opposition in the chameleon-like figure of 'The Guerrilla', an urban terrorist who haunts the intimidated populace like a conscience.

*First the Desert Came and then the Torturer* is really a contemporary political fable, an oddly fashionable genre these days, and reading the poem one is reminded of J.P. Clark's *Casualties* or the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's 'The Star-apple Kingdom'. 'That

Country' could be any one of several African states in recent times, though some of the particulars locate it precisely as the author's putative homeland. The infamous massacre of Bakalori Dam, for instance, is unmistakably invoked in the poem 'River Valley'

The foreign excavators came to flood their farms  
They put sand in the petrol tanks

Then there were boots jumping down from jeeps  
and guns killed them through their own doorways  
more than three hundred of them

The rest stared across the water of a lake.

Idi Bukar is clearly a poet of some stature; the poems bristle with outrage and despair, yet the writing is tense, incisive, lean. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa the metaphors of the desert and the torturer stand for both natural and historical experiences of drought and destruction; that they are shown to be apt and powerful symbols for an account of the contemporary situation in the region is a telling indictment of the times.

One understands why, given the political climate, Idi Bukar should choose to disguise — however thinly — the identity of 'That Country'. One wonders, though, if the subterfuge hasn't been taken a stage further in the prudent adoption of a pseudonym? Idi Bukar's work doesn't appear in any of the anthologies of African verse, nor in any of the literary periodicals, yet he is clearly an accomplished poet, fluent in all the techniques of his craft. Maybe he — or she — fears, like the Guerrilla in the poem, that things have reached the stage where, 'once you identify yourself// you become invisible'. Perhaps he's wise to stay in his metaphorical Sabon Gari, the strangers' quarter, and observe the society's 'drama in old clothes' from that vantage.

Certainly, pseudonymous or not, *First the Desert Came and then the Torturer* is urgent reading both for those interested in the poetry of Africa and for anyone concerned with the condition of Nigeria now.

STEWART BROWN

Njabulu S. Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories*. Ravan Press, 1983. 280 pp. £3.95.

*Fools and Other Stories* was co-winner of the 1984 Noma award. The reasons for this choice are obvious. The collection is a near-perfect example of the black South African short story, and by virtue of that it defines the space, subject matter and style which make this category a recognizable genre within the wider categories of African literature and the short story. It shares its themes and setting as well as many of the sentiments with the autobiographies of growing up in the township, but it brings a care for even the minutest details of style and language which gives immediacy, freshness and emotion to even well-known themes.

The autobiographical genre has its own rules, and these are observed by writers like Mphahlele and Peter Abrahams: First the author's young self is unaware of grown-up reality, mainly racial oppression, and he describes the world around him as seen through innocent eyes. The township is generally a warm and safe place, occasionally disturbed by references to street violence. This innocence is broken, usually by the protagonist being subjected to an act of racial humiliation, and after that there is educational advancement, political awareness and rage, and final escape to the free world. All the stories in the volume except the title story take place within a narrow range of this spectrum. Told either in the first-person or the third-person narrative, the protagonist is a school boy of an age just on the brink of adolescence with its accompanying sexual awareness and rebellion — 'bravery meant forgetting about one's mother.'

In all the stories the boy is timid, nervous, weak and frequently humiliated, either by other boys or by his mother. He is set apart socially from the other boys in the township by virtue of his parents' education; the mother is a nurse in all the stories, and the father is a school teacher. The boy carries the weight of the manners and aspirations of middle-class parents, exemplified in one of the stories by him having to play the violin. Despite all these handicaps, each story celebrates a victory. He refuses to play the violin, he takes an unauthorized run in the rain, he is disobedient or he calmly sheds a belief in the supernatural ('The Prophetess'). Each story ends on a note of triumph and fulfilment. The story 'Uncle' ends not just on a note of triumph, but in a celebration of African township customs and life. 'And there is the gramophone, the trumpet, the concertina, the guitar, the mouth organ, the hooting cars, and the wedding song. And the *setapo* dance is raising dust into the air. And Mother is passing cool drink.... Oh, Uncle, everybody is here.'

The story celebrates the special uncle/nephew relationship of the author's culture. In a series of beautiful scenes the uncle teaches the boy all the values central to their lives: the role of the family, the ancestors' ethics, morality, sex and racial pride. With a minimum of pain the boy is carried into adulthood because of his boundless — and institutionalized — admiration of the uncle. His mother's more realistic view of the uncle reveals a picture of a complicated and at times difficult person, which saves the story from banality and gives the celebration credibility.

This sense of triumph is an unusual tone in black South African literature, and Njabulu Ndebele explained in a lecture, given at the Commonwealth Institute in November 1984 (see interview with Ndebele in this issue of *Kunapipi*), that he perceives this shift of emphasis away from protest and towards 'affirmation' as a new and positive direction in black South African literature. He dislikes what he calls 'the liberal academic view', according to which black South Africans are simply seen as suffering and in need of rescue, and he mentioned a series of interviews with black miners which showed that even their lives contained 'small victories', and that they 'saved their humanity' through them. These stories manage to convey the quality and importance of 'small victories' without glossing over the inhumanity of the system.

The title story of the volume, however, differs both in tone and persona from the rest of the stories. It is a first-person narrative, and the narrator is a fifty-year-old school teacher with an extremely inglorious past — including embezzlement of church funds and the rape of a school girl — and a miserable and humiliating present, despised by his community for his deeds. He meets a young idealistic and promising teacher, newly returned from college and — it turns out — brother of the girl he has raped. The two men strike up a relationship of hatred and unwilling affection, in which the older man sees the younger man as his own hopeful beginning and the younger man despises the older one for the mess he has made of his life, but at the same time he has the seeds of self-

destruction within himself. What rescues them both, at least momentarily, is political action. The older man is personally cleansed by his silent courage in facing an agry Boer with a whip, but the young man is thwarted in his immature acts of protest, but continues defiant, if confused. Apart from anything else the two men come to represent the different attitudes to political action of two generations in South Africa, and it traces the inevitable radicalization in the younger generation. The life of the township, the school system, and the wider social system of apartheid are seen as intimately interwoven, and only political action can give back humanity to people who have come to accept living without self-respect as an inevitability. The theme of apartheid is not avoided, and the necessity of the struggle is taken for granted, but from that standpoint *Fools and Other Stories* does not protest, but analyses and affirms the goodness of existing black values.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

David Helwig and Sandra Martin, eds., *Coming Attractions 2: Diane Schoemperlen, Joan Fern Shaw and Michael Rawdon*. Oberon Press, 1984. 139 pages. Cloth \$21.95, paper \$11.95 (Cdn.).

*Coming Attractions 2* is a good example of the kind of publishing initiative that has stimulated the recent growth in Canadian literature. It is the latest of Oberon's annual collections introducing three new fiction writers, and though readers will not agree with all the choices, they will experience variety and a substantial enough sampling to allow some judgment of the writers.

Diane Schoemperlen's three stories are the least conventional in form, building as much on cataloguing and montage of vignettes as on narrative. They create an ironic social world of young adults in the 1970s, using the kind of stereotypes Margaret Atwood has sometimes moved sardonically among to good effect. The stories can be convincing, but rarely show enough sophistication for trenchant social satire or enough narrative interest to make the stereotypes come to life.

Joan Fern Shaw writes about urban (Toronto) childhood in the 1940s, and she resembles Alice Munro in exploring the edges of society, the edges of normalcy, the fraying edges of life which can reveal more than the smooth weave at the centre. Yet her stories are more optimistic. As David Helwig says in his introduction, 'we see a reversal of the usual picture of the victimized, sensitive child.' The child's sensitivity triumphs, finding not disillusionment and defeat but the unexpected human value in her experiences with a dying aunt, a survivor of the holocaust or a Jewish rag-picker.

Michael Rawdon has apparently been writing in Canada but publishing elsewhere for twenty years, and the two better stories collected here are set mainly in Spain. Both are distinguished by articulate, cerebral, authoritative narrative voices exploring a young man's emergence into maturity. The importance Rawdon gives to ideas is especially enjoyable in 'Bright Imago', which develops the greatest intellectual complexity yet has a haunting quality, probably because it calls forth some of the mysteries at the heart of Rawdon's characters without explaining them away.

*Coming Attractions 2* contains nothing obviously Canadian, aside from a few place names. Nor does it show either startling novelty or modish affectation. It may be signifi-

cant that the three writers are all in their 30s and 40s. They write mature, well-crafted fiction, the more enjoyable because of the variety in their work.

DICK HARRISON

## Conference Reports

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New Writing in African Literature: the Historic Moment? London, 1-3 November 1984.

'New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change' was organised by the Commonwealth Institute and the Africa Centre. This was an interesting conference. It set out to be different from the usual academic conference, if not in content, then at least in form, and the organizers — The Commonwealth Institute and the Africa Centre, both in London — aimed at a practical result in the form of a handbook for African writers, containing useful information about writers' groups, publishing, contracts, agents, copyright etc. The writers were very much at the centre at this conference or, to put it more precisely, the African writers, both those of international fame and the relatively unknown ones. There were no papers given by critics on the subject of African literature, but instead there were keynote addresses, given by writers, followed by panel discussions (also by writers) and general discussion. Apart from these, there was a series of workshops on themes ranging from 'writing for and by women' to 'criticism' to 'writing for the radio' and 'writing in African languages'.

After the official welcome very few white faces appeared in prominent positions on the programme. The conference entertainment consisted of a fine performance of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micera Mugo's play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by the Wazalendo Players. The play has attracted a great deal of attention in London, partly because of the Kenyan High Commission's attempts at having it banned, following angry questions in the Kenyan parliament. Both co-authors attended the conference, and they went on stage and took part in the defiant song which concluded the play. To sum up: we heard it from the horse's mouth.

What, then, did the horse say? Nothing surprising, really. It seems clear that the battleground of African writing has not changed significantly in the last five years, but perhaps the lines have been drawn up a little more sharply. The main areas of discussion and controversy (at times with a pinch of salt) are still the language question and the question of a universalist versus a particularist school of criticism. This may sound academic, but both areas are highly political, dealing as they do with African strategies in the battle against cultural imperialism.

An obviously embattled Ngugi wa Thiong'o gave the opening key address. He repeated his well-known criticism of the 'neo-colonial betrayal' by writers who write in English for a small urban élite and stressed the necessity of using an African language to convey an African experience. To him, identity is inextricably bound up with language. Modern African literature must have as its roots oral African literature, 'orature', and it must direct its message of liberation from neo-colonialism to the African peasants in a language which is theirs. Lewis Nkosi drew up the line of the counter argument sharply when he addressed Ngugi in Zulu. Ngugi's answer was translation. Nkosi's point was obvious, but behind the banality lies, I think, a real danger in Ngugi's approach: the writers would lose touch with each other as a writing community, or rather their degree of contact would be decided by the translation policy of publishers, likely to be Anglo-Saxon or multi-national, and those are surely forces into whose hands Ngugi would deliver no-one. His speech carried an almost prophetic conviction that the historic moment was ripe for a decisive change, and most writers who spoke during the conference felt compelled to give their opinion on the point. Micere Mugo, whilst basically agreeing with Ngugi, pointed out that there existed a group of mainly young writers who could not write in an African language, and she recommended 'lenience' towards such victims 'who had been robbed of their own language'. Timothy Wangusa from Uganda thought that if the writing was 'strong', the language was unimportant, thus creating a separation between message and expression which, if accepted, effectively undermines Ngugi's argument. The franco-phone writers were also divided, although they appeared to show more reverence towards the French language. Ahmed Sheikh from Senegal conceded the importance of language in the process of decolonization, whilst Regis Fanchette from Mauritius was not fussy about which language he wrote in. This position appeared extreme in terms of a non-ideological approach, and the general feeling tended more towards Ngugi's point of view.

The critical controversy was a continuation of Chinweizu et al. versus Soyinka. Chinweizu was there, supporting his demand for a criticism which builds its concepts and its system of evaluation on local, tribal oral literature and rejects eurocentric claims to universalism in the form of structuralist, marxist or any other ism-based critical school. The two sides are, however, united in a wish for both cultural and economic liberation; what they disagree about is what exactly this constitutes. Emanuel Ngara from Zimbabwe who has laboured hard to contract a marriage between a marxist approach and his own interest in stylistic criticism (he is the author of *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel* (Heinemann, 1982)) was not impressed with Chinweizu's ideas because he was doubtful about claiming traditional literature as a source for critical tools, as society changes all the time.

Women writers were much in evidence and contributed significantly to the success of the conference. There will be a presentation of the individual writers on the women's panel and a discussion of their work in the Summer 1985 issue of *Kunapipi*.

One of the highlights of the conference was a talk about the state of South African literature, given by Jabudu Ndebele from the University of Lesotho. He is co-winner of the 1984 Noma award with his collection of short stories *Fools and Other Stories*, and he stressed the importance of a movement away from protest and despair and towards a more self-assured affirmation of dignity and even 'small victories' in the description of life under apartheid. There is an interview with him as well as a review of *Fools and Other Stories* in the Summer 1985 issue of *Kunapipi*.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

*Bruce Clunies Ross* teaches at the University of Copenhagen. *Diana Sampey* is an Australian living in London. She is currently completing a book of short stories. *Katherine Gallagher* is an Australian living in London. Her latest volume of poetry, *Passengers to the City* will be published by Hale & Iremonger in 1985. *Mimi Reiner* is an Australian. Her story 'For Better, or for Worse' won the EACLALS Short Story Competition. *Geoff Page* has published five books of poetry and is editor of *Shadows from Wire: Poems and Photographs of Australians in the Great War*. He lives in Canberra and is head of the English Department at Narrabundah College. *Richard Kelly Tipping* has written two books of poems for University of Queensland Press, *Soft Riots* (1972) and *Domestic Hardcore* (1975) and is completing a third called *Word of Mouth*. His screenprints and sculptures have been in exhibitions including *The Everlasting Stone* (Adelaide, 1978), *Word Works* (Sydney and Melbourne, 1980) and *Outside Inside* (Brisbane, 1981). He produced large-scale installations for the Adelaide Festival, the Festival of Sydney and the Sydney Biennale 1982. He has also produced a book of photographs, *Signs of Australia*. He works in the film industry, and performs poetry, often with his own music: banjo-ukulele, jawharp and didjeridu. *Kirsten Holst Petersen* is Danish Research Fellow at the Scandinavian Institute for African Studies in Uppsala, Sweden. *Sara Chetin* is an American who is at present doing post-graduate work at the University of Kent, Canterbury. *Chidi Amuta* teaches at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. *Bheki Maseko* is born in South Africa and lives in Johannesburg. His stories have been published in the *Sunday Post* and in *Staffrider*. *Cherry Clayton* teaches at Rand Afrikaans University. Her poems and short stories have been included in South African anthologies. *Dorothy Jones* teaches at the University of Wollongong, Australia. *Paul Vella* is a French artist.

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Diana Sampey, Mimi Reimer, Bheki Maseko.

## POEMS

Katherine Gallagher, Geoff Page, Richard Kelly Tipping, Cherry Clayton.

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